

The UNESCO World Heritage List in a Globalized World: The Case of the Paleolithic Caves of Northern Spain (1985–2008)

Eduardo Palacio Pérez

Abstract

Northern Spain is home to one of the richest concentrations of Paleolithic cave art found anywhere in the world. The universal value of this heritage was first recognized by UNESCO in 1985, when the cave of Altamira was inscribed in the World Heritage List. In 2008, a further seventeen cave art sites in the region were added to the original list. In this paper I examine this process with reference to two main issues. First, taking the case of Cantabria as a paradigm, I examine the archaeological and heritage narratives that, since the end of the nineteenth century, have made these caves a center of global rock art research. In particular, I discuss the role of these narratives in the nomination process that led to securing UNESCO World Heritage status. Second, I analyze the impact that the World Heritage status has had for Cantabria, a region in which a plurality of stakeholders must be satisfied. I suggest that the economic (tourism), conservation (heritage value), and academic (intellectual value) factors that were the primary drivers in establishing the World Heritage status of the caves constitute a plurality of diverse (and sometimes opposed) interests that have yet to be reconciled. This case study has important implications for the ways in which Paleolithic rock art is globalized by archaeological, heritage, and local communities alike.

Keywords

Cantabria · Conservation · Eurocentrism · Paleolithic cave art · Research · Tourism · World heritage

E. P. Pérez (✉)

Curator of Prehistoric caves of Cantabria, Cuevas de Monte Castillo, Puente Viesgo, Cantabria, Spain
e-mail: palacio_e@cantabria.es

14.1 History of the Inscription of “Cave of Altamira and Paleolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain” on UNESCO’s World Heritage List

The Cantabrian Mountains are riddled by numerous caves, many of which contain large ensembles of Paleolithic art. Their favorable state of conservation makes this region a privileged place for the study of these prehistoric images. The engraved and painted motifs in the caves of Northern Spain, despite displaying some peculiarities, form part of a wider tradition that encompasses the whole of Paleolithic art in south-west Europe.

On July 7, 2008, UNESCO added seventeen cave art sites in this region to the World Heritage List: Peña Candamo, Tito Bustillo, La Covaciella, Llonín, El Pindal, Chufín, Hornos de la Peña, El Castillo, La Pasiiega, Las Chimeneas, Las Monedas, El Pendo, La Garma, Covalanas, Santimamiñe, Ekain, and Altxerri (Fig. 14.1). This designation was the culmination of a long process that started with the inscription of Altamira Cave in the World Heritage list in 1985 (UNESCO 1985). The universal value ascribed to Altamira was based on its definition as a unique prehistoric artistic site and as outstanding evidence of Magdalenian cultures in southern Europe. However, most experts were aware that Altamira was not an isolated site and that many other caves in Northern Spain displayed similar qualities (Ontañón Peredo 2009). Consequently, the Autonomous Communities (administrative divisions into which Spain has been organized since 1978) of Asturias and Cantabria drafted a proposal to include the Paleolithic art cave in the region in the World Heritage List. At that time, about a hundred sites were known. In 1998, this proposal was added to the ‘Spanish Tentative list of World Heritage.’ It should be noted that the World Heritage Committee only considers candidatures that have been previously placed on the tentative list of each state party (Spain in this case). This was a sensitive proposal with some solid antecedents. For instance, in 1979 UNESCO had listed the

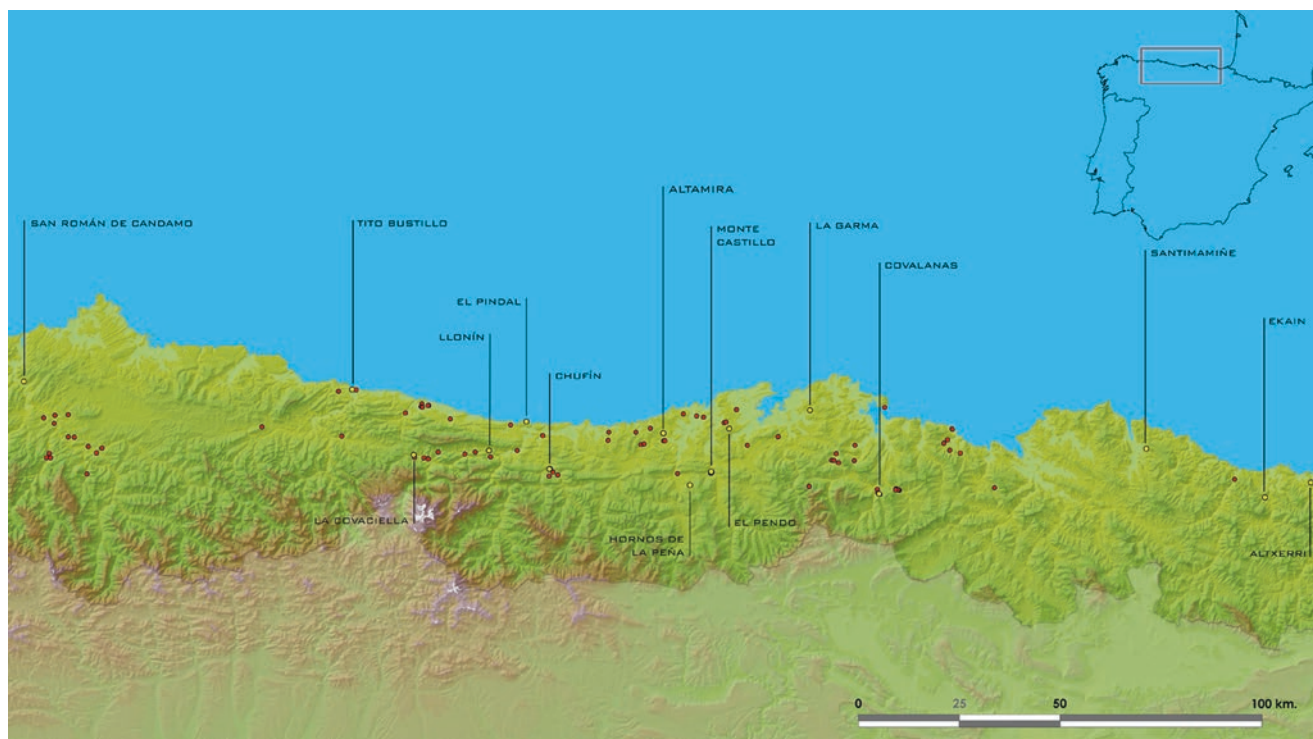


Fig. 14.1 Map of the Cantabrian region in Northern Spain representing the cave art sites. The names of the World Heritage sites are indicated (© Ingenia S.L.)

property ‘Prehistoric Sites and Decorated Caves of the Vézère Valley,’ comprising 172 archaeological and cave art sites, such as Lascaux Cave (UNESCO 1979). More recently, in 1998, the ‘Rock Art of the Mediterranean Basin on the Iberian Peninsula’ was added to the World Heritage List, comprising 758 rock art sites (UNESCO 1998). Both inscribed sites reflect the idea of ‘serial properties’ consisting of multiple related sites.

In the early twenty-first century, ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) carried out studies that demonstrated the benefits of including the northern Spanish Paleolithic cave art sites in the World Heritage List (Clottes 2002). Finally, the proposal of extending the inscription of Altamira to other caves from the same region was given impetus in 2005, when the Basque Country supported the original 1998 proposal. However, the candidature had to be reformulated in the light of the new requirements that UNESCO had defined as a part of its new global strategy. The ‘Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List,’ created by UNESCO in 1994, sought to accomplish two main goals. The first was to expand the definition of World Heritage beyond cultural properties and to include places with a particular natural value. The second was to encourage the candidature of under-represented regions around the globe, as most sites listed until then were located in Europe (and associated with Christianity). The ultimate goal was to include properties that were not only

“evidence of human creative genius” expressed in the great works of world social elites, but that also reflected “human beings in society” and “human coexistence with the land” (UNESCO 1994).

Certainly, this was not the most favorable context in which to extend the inscription of Altamira to the rest of cave art sites in the region, especially considering that in 2005 Spain was the country with the second-most properties on the World Heritage List. However, the Spanish state was able to take advantage of this situation by presenting the case as an instance of an under-represented type of property, as prehistoric sites were a minority on the World Heritage List (Clottes 2002; Sanz and Coord 2009).

Additionally, extending Altamira’s World Heritage designation to the rest of the caves in the region implied expanding the number of protected sites without increasing the total number of Spanish properties on the World Heritage list (Ontañón Peredo 2009). The proposal required a rigorous selection of cave art sites, which meant that several criteria had to be applied: numerical proportionality between the three autonomous communities, archaeological representativeness of the art ensembles, and the quality of the conservation and management of the sites. Finally, specialists chose the 17 abovementioned caves mentioned (please see Fig. 14.1). Moreover, to be successful, the candidature had to fulfil at least one of the ten criteria that UNESCO established to justify the universal value of the property. This extension

applied the same criteria as used for the original nomination of Altamira: “i) it bears testimony to the creative genius of man during the different periods of the Upper Paleolithic” and “iii) bears outstanding and unique testimony to an ancient stage, which vanished more than 10,000 years ago, of the origins of human civilization” (UNESCO 2008).

Although adding the northern Spanish caves to the World Heritage List has resulted in numerous advantages for the management, conservation, research, and dissemination of knowledge of the properties (for a more detailed account, please see Ontañón Peredo and Rodríguez Asensio 2016), the inscription in the list also posed a number of challenges. In this setting, many questions are relevant: What do the caves with rock art mean for the regional and local communities that live near them? Are they relevant for all humankind? Are the many conservation, dissemination, and economic dimensions of the caves contradictory? To what extent is the approach to this archaeological heritage the product of subjective decisions based on historical inertia, ideological conceptions, and economic interests? To answer these questions, I would like to examine two key aspects. First, I will focus on how a number of archaeological and heritage narratives about these caves has been constructed. These narratives are not univocal but express different ways of conceiving the significance of the past. Different ideas, conceptions, and values are superimposed and intermingled, generating tensions and contradictions. Second, I will analyze how heritage (conservation), economic (tourism), and intellectual (research) factors have been projected to cave art and have become the key forces behind the designation of the northern Spanish caves as World Heritage sites. To do this, I will concentrate on the case of Cantabria, where the long tradition in the study, conservation, and tourist use of this kind of archaeological heritage is particularly relevant.

14.2 Archaeological and Heritage Narratives About Cantabrian Cave Art

Narratives around Paleolithic art in the region, like that of other heritage properties, have been constructed as a mechanism to create new forms of the social and individual identity generated by modernity (Hernando Gonzalo 2002, 2006, 2009). These narratives form part of the scientific discourse about the origins of humankind; they select the most outstanding works of our past and transform them into identity symbols.

These narratives about historical heritage have varied over time and have changed depending on the opinions of experts, engendering a variety of feelings in different individuals and communities. In particular, archaeological narratives have promoted nationalist feelings on different scales (Kohl and Fawcett 1996; Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996),

but they have also been used to promote universal values supposedly shared by all humans. (Merode et al. 2003).

The narrative of Cantabrian cave art has formed part of this debate since its scientific discovery; it is not independent of the discourse proposed for the rest of European Paleolithic cave art, but does possess some peculiarities. The Paleolithic art of Northern Spain has also been used to promote different feeling and ideologies, including nationalism and universalism. That said, the construction of a narrative with universalist pretensions on the origins of art and modern human behavior was dominant until the late twentieth century (Palacio-Pérez 2013, 2017). Besides the obvious fact that this concept has been driven by eurocentrism (Moro Abadía and Tapper 2021), this narrative has four main traits. First, Franco-Cantabrian Paleolithic art was included in a unified category of art that connected the remotest past of humanity with the present through a universal aesthetic feeling (Moro Abadía and González Morales 2005a; Palacio-Pérez 2013). Second, according to this narrative, art originated in Europe (Dowson 1998, 68–69). Third, archaeologists and art historians maintained that European parietal art was the finest manifestation of ‘primitive art.’ This was related to the prevalence in art history of a paradigm that valued artistic form and skill, as well as the ability to achieve highly naturalistic depictions (please see Fig. 14.2) (Moro Abadía et al. 2012). Fourth, cave art in Western Europe was regarded as representing the first form of religiosity (Palacio-Pérez 2010). In other words, Cantabrian Paleolithic art was viewed as the origin of the artistic and symbolic capacity of humans, ignoring other artistic traditions. This view concealed a par-

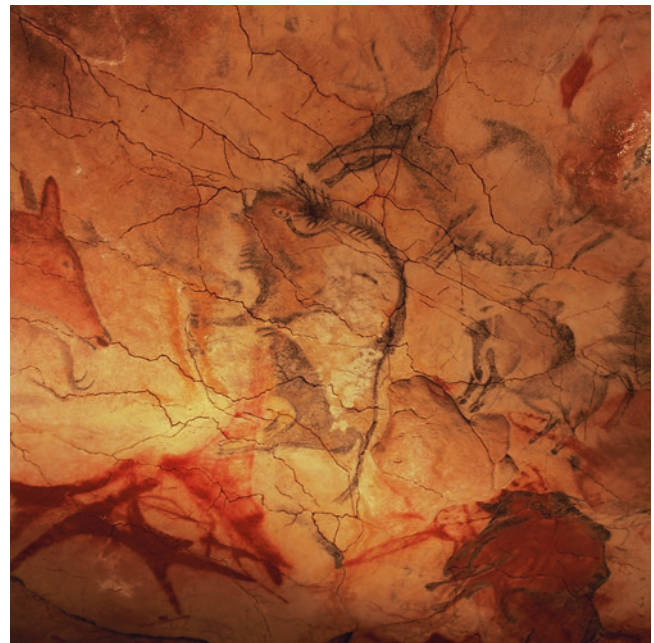


Fig. 14.2 Polychrome Ceiling of Altamira Cave (© UNESCO, Author: Yvon Fruneau)

ticularistic logic because it involved granting European cultural heritage an innovative character that was implicitly denied to other cultures.

Prehistoric cave art has also fueled nationalist sentiments. Spanish archaeology has not systematically exploited its earliest prehistory for the creation of a national identity; that active role has been the reserve of protohistory (Díaz-Andreu 1995; González Morales 1992). However, cave art in Cantabria was at the core of two Spanish myths. The first one concerns the glorifying story of the discovery and recognition of Altamira (Moro Abadía and González Morales 2005b). This symbol of Spanish prehistory was constructed in the early twentieth century, in a moment in which most research in the caves of Cantabria was carried out by foreign prehistorians mainly based at the *Institut de Paléontologie Humaine* (Moure Romanillo 1996, 25). The narrative celebrated Spanish prehistory by exaggerating French prehistorians' rejection of the discovery of Altamira: "For 20 years, the French obscurantists maintained the error in the field of science, in opposition to the learned Spanish" (Carballo 1910 cited by Madariaga de la Campa 1972, 240). Since then, traditional historiography has tended to exaggerate the debate about the acceptance of Altamira by presenting it as a "struggle that had both provincial and international boundaries" (García Guinea 1979, 37) or as a "romantic adventure" (Madariaga de la Campa 2002, 10). Naturally, the main figures in this debate, Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola and Juan Vilanova y Piera, were praised, presented as "Spanish heroes" (Carballo 1950, XLIII), or as the "noble and zealous knights committed to fighting the mistake that questioned the discoverer's honorability" (Madariaga de la Campa 2002, 9).

Altamira and other prehistoric caves served to justify another Spanish myth, i.e. the idea of a genuine Spanish creative genius that could be traced back to prehistoric times: "Spain is the land of art, of originality, of spirituality. These qualities were already present in (Spanish) Paleolithic art" (Marqués de Cerralbo 1915, IV). Similarly, the paintings and engravings of Cantabria proved "irrefutably that in those remote times Spain was at the head of civilization and the greatest human culture shone in it" (Carballo 1924, 93). Prehistoric depictions were described as the pinnacle of art: "Neither in beauty nor in antiquity, nothing has been able to supersede the art of Northern Spain. With Altamira it reached a peak that now cannot be surpassed" (Pericot García 1953: 25).

The death of General Franco in 1975 led to a change of the Spanish political system. Dictatorship was replaced by democracy and the country was reorganized into new administrative divisions called 'Autonomous Communities'; Cantabria being one of them. In this new context, prehistoric caves became one of the symbols of the new region (Moro Abadía 2008). The caves of Monte Castillo and, especially, Altamira became *the* icons of Cantabria. For example,

Altamira's paintings were used in advertisements by regional businesses and were the symbols of numerous tourism campaigns. However, it is important to note that, since their designation as World Heritage sites, this narrative has been reoriented towards a much more universalistic and international perspective. For instance, the President of Cantabria said in 2010: "The caves [...] are the most outstanding example of the history, cultural diversity and cross-border, international character of the region of Cantabria" (Fernández Vega et al. 2010, 5).

To sum up, cave art sites have fuelled three main narratives: (1) a universal narrative that depicts Altamira and the Cantabrian caves as the origins of art, (2) a national narrative that made cave art a symbol of Spanish identity since the beginnings of the twentieth century, and (3) a local narrative that, starting in the late 1970s, made of Altamira and the other prehistoric caves a symbol of the Cantabrian region.

It is important to note that there is no opposition among the narratives above. In fact, the three narratives function in an interconnected and complementary way. For instance, the universal narrative about the origins of art is often evoked in terms of national and regional pride. Moreover, there is no contradiction between the national and the local narratives because the Spanish and Cantabrian identities are not opposed.

In any case, the dominant narrative was based on a Eurocentric perception that considered cave art to represent the origins of artistic skill and modern symbolic behavior. This discourse surrounding Paleolithic art was not challenged until the late twentieth century. However, as Moro Abadía and Tapper have pointed out (2021), in the first years of the present century, the introduction of novel techniques of analysis (especially new dating methods) and the impact of globalization in prehistoric research have called this Eurocentrism into question. First, after discoveries such as the two pieces of ochre engraved with geometric motifs in Blombos Cave (Henshilwood et al. 2002), it is no longer possible to maintain that Pleistocene art originated in Europe. It is even problematic to sustain the notion that Pleistocene parietal art was predominantly a European phenomenon, since many discoveries have been made in Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia in the last decades (Clottes 2012). The global character of Paleolithic art has been confirmed by recent discoveries such as Narwala Gabarnmung (Australia) (Bruno et al. 2013), Sulawesi (Indonesia) (Aubert et al. 2014), and Lubang Jerili Saléh (Borneo) (Aubert et al. 2018), among others.

Paradoxically, the UNESCO nomination of 'Cave of Altamira and Paleolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain' (UNESCO 2008) did not reflect this global dimension of Paleolithic art. Rather, it was anchored in a Eurocentric point of view in which Cantabrian caves were presented as the beginnings of art and symbolism. This is related to the fact

that the nomination sought to satisfy several stakeholders in contemporary society, rather than develop a critical view on cave art. In this setting, the nomination continued to celebrate Paleolithic art from Northern Spain as the symbol of a “new human culture involving profound material changes, the invention of new techniques, and the development of artistic expression through painting, engraving and sculpture” (UNESCO 2008, 181). Furthermore, it continues to place European Paleolithic hunter-gatherers at the peak of cultural innovation, because they “achieved an accomplished artistic, symbolic and spiritual expression of their human society” (UNESCO 2008, 182). This poses the question of what underpins the designation of World Heritage status. In this case it undoubtedly was not a critical reflection on the past, but rather the elaboration of a symbol that embodies values to be preserved, reaffirmed, and, if possible, exploited.

14.3 Research, Conservation, and Dissemination of Paleolithic Art in Cantabria: A Long Road Towards World Heritage Status

The caves from Cantabria are a paradigmatic example of how research, tourist exploitation, and conservation are usually interconnected in the management of rock art. In this section, I discuss some of these issues with reference to the research, conservation, and knowledge dissemination of the caves from Northern Spain.

14.3.1 A Long History

After the authentication of Altamira in the last years of the nineteenth century (Moro Abadía and González Morales 2005b), archaeologists undertook intense fieldwork in the region. For instance, in 1902, Henri Breuil and Émile Cartailhac extensively worked in Altamira (Cartailhac and Breuil 1906). From 1903 to 1910, the so-called ‘race of discoveries’ (Madariaga de la Campa 1972, 38) was headed by two local amateur prehistorians, Hermilio Alcalde del Río and Lorenzo Sierra, who found a large number of cave art sites (including El Castillo, Hornos de la Peña, Covalanas, La Haza, etc.). Prince Albert I of Monaco funded a number of cave art studies between 1906 and 1910, especially those that culminated in the publication of *Les Cavernes de la Région Cantabrique* (Alcalde del Río et al. 1911). Those studies helped to establish some ideas about the procedures, chronology, and meaning prehistoric art that were prevalent until the mid-twentieth century.

After 1910, individual initiatives were replaced by research promoted by national and international institutions. Particularly important is the role played by the *Institut de*

Paléontologie Humaine (IPH), founded in 1910 thanks to the sponsorship of Prince Albert I of Monaco (Hurel 2015). In Cantabria, the IPH funded excavations in El Castillo (Cabrera Valdés 1984) as well as the publication of *La Pasiega* (Breuil et al. 1913). The excavation in El Castillo, directed by Hugo Obermaier, had an international impact because of the depth of the stratigraphy and the scientific reputation of the archaeologists. International collaboration ended in 1914 with the advent of World War I. At that time, the main Spanish institution devoted to the study of cave art was the *Comisión de Investigaciones Paleontológicas y Prehistóricas* (CIPP), founded in 1912 with its headquarters in the Museum of Natural Sciences in Madrid. The CIPP played a key role in the institutionalization of prehistoric research in Spain and published some key text in those years, such as *El Arte Rupestre en España* (Cabré Aguiló 1915) as well as *Fossil Man in Spain* (Obermaier 1916), whose chapter on Cantabrian prehistoric art was the best synthesis published on this topic at that time. An international institution that played an important role in the study of cave art in Cantabria was the *Forschungsinstitut für Kulturmorphologie* (Germany) and its excavations in El Castillo, La Pasiega, Altamira, and Hornos de la Peña in 1936 (Gracia 2009).

Almost from the beginning, this intense research was accompanied by the tourist exploitation of the sites. The use of cave art as an economic resource intensified with the development of tourism as a form of affirmation of national identity and as a leisure industry (Díaz-Andreu 2019).

From the initial discovery, Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola had to take measures to protect Altamira Cave because the controversy over the age of the paintings brought many people to the cave. He closed the entrance of the cave with a wooden door in 1879 that was replaced by a metal gate 1 year later (Lasheras and Prada 2015). In the case of El Castillo Cave, the discoverer Hermilio Alcalde del Río took charge of its management from 1903 to 1931 (García-Díez et al. 2012). Generally speaking, in those years, the discoverer (or a local guide without scientific training) showed the caves to a reduced number of visitors. The person in charge usually kept the key to the cave door and led the visitors inside, showing them the paintings and engravings on the walls. Consequently, the figure of the ‘local guide’ emerged and became a key role in the tourism of the time. Hotel owners in the towns near the caves, specifically in Santillana del Mar (near Altamira) and Puente Viesgo (near El Castillo) began to note the first arrivals of tourists in those years.

In the 1920s, a number of Spanish institutions, such as the *Comisaría Regia de Turismo* (later *Patronato Nacional de Turismo*), were created to promote tourism in archaeological sites (Díaz-Andreu 2014, 21–22). The caves were an attraction for an educated and exclusive public, who also enjoyed visiting the towns of the region, like Santillana del Mar and Puente Viesgo. The first institutions were created to manage

the increase in the number of tourists. In particular, the *Junta Protectora de la Cueva de Altamira* (which became *Patronato de Altamira* in 1925) was created to take charge of the conservation of the cave and the renovations to adapt the cave for tourist visits. For instance, a small museum was created, an access road was built, and electric lighting was installed inside the cave. At the same time, the natural form of the cave began to be irreversibly altered with the construction of interior walls (Lasheras and Prada 2015). The first illustrated guidebook about the cave of Altamira was published in those years (please see Fig. 14.3) (Obermaier 1928). In 1940, the *Patronato de Altamira* began to manage the caves of Monte Castillo too, and, starting in 1944, it changed its name to the *Patronato de las Cuevas Prehistóricas* and took charge of all the rock art sites in the region.

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the long post-war period interrupted archaeological work. The dictatorship of General Franco (1939–1975) marked a time of isolation in regional research. In the early 1950s, Jesús Carballo and García Lorenzo discovered the caves of Las Monedas (1952) and Las Chimeneas (1953), whose parietal art ensembles then began to be studied (González Echegaray 1952; Ripoll Perelló 1954).

The end of international isolation following Eisenhower's visit to Spain in 1959 and the new role of Spain in the Cold War marked the start of a period of international collaboration. For instance, a number of American archaeologists (F. Clark Howell, Karl Butzer, and Leslie Gordon Freeman) came to Spain, and they played an important role in the resurgence of Spanish archaeology (Straus 2016). The collaboration between Joaquín González Echegaray and Leslie G. Freeman was particularly important, not only because of their excavations in Cueva Morín and El Juyo, but also because of their seminal work in Altamira (Freeman and

Echegaray 1987). Nevertheless, at that time, the most influential researchers in Paleolithic art studies were the French academics Annette Laming-Emperaire and André Leroi-Gourhan (González Sainz 2005; Palacio-Pérez and Moro Abadía 2020). During the 1970s, the caves of Chufín and Micolón were discovered (Almagro Basch 1973; García Guinea et al. 1982) and two conferences on Paleolithic art achieved an international impact: *Santander Symposium* (Almagro Basch and García Guinea 1972) and *Altamira Symposium* (Almagro Basch and Fernandez-Miranda 1980).

The end of Spain's international isolation in the 1950s and '60 s brought about new policies, mainly centered on mass tourism. In the span of a few years, tourism became the new driving force of the Spanish economy. The democratization of family transport with the use of cars increased the possibilities for travel. Spanish provinces hastened to display their best monuments, which in the case of Santander were the prehistoric caves. The *Patronato de las Cuevas Prehistóricas* started a program to adapt and prepare the caves for the massive arrival of tourists, including El Castillo, La Pasiega, Las Monedas, Las Chimeneas, Covalanas, La Haza, and Hornos de la Peña (García-Díez et al. 2012). In 1971, the road that gives access to Altamira was widened and three new buildings were built to provide a cafeteria and a restaurant for visitors. These renovations sought to make the caves more accessible, but failed to consider the impact of the renovation works and, especially, the massive numbers of visitors on the condition of the art. Some numbers can illustrate this point. 55,000 people visited Altamira in 1955, and by 1975 that number had risen to 175,000 visitors per year. In 1967, 1300 people visited the cave in a single day. The popularity of Altamira was used to promote visits to other Paleolithic art sites in the region (including discount tickets to other caves). Altamira became the center of an economy built around prehistoric art, resulting in the opening of numerous hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, etc. However, the touristic exploitation of the sites quickly endangered the conservation of the art.

The triumph of democracy in 1976 entailed the introduction of a number of changes to Spain's administrative structure (decentralization and the creation of autonomous communities) and academic institutions (creation of new universities), and these changes impacted archaeological research in regional prehistory. The establishment of Prehistory Department at University of Cantabria fueled archaeological research in an unprecedented way. On one hand, a number of cave art sites were reevaluated, included La Pasiega (De Balbín Behrmann and González Sainz 1993), Covalanas, and La Haza (Moure Romanillo and González Sainz 1991). On the other, new sites were discovered, including Fuente del Salín (Moure Romanillo et al. 1984) and La Garma (Arias et al. 2004). At the same time, new theoretical frameworks were introduced (Conkey 1980, 1984; Moure



Fig. 14.3 Cover of the first tourist guide to the Altamira cave, published in 1928

Romanillo 1994). From the 1980s onwards, rock art research in Cantabria has enjoyed a revival, with the introduction of new methods and techniques that have placed the Cantabrian caves at the center of major international debates about Paleolithic art (e.g., White et al. 2020).

In the past 50 years, the conservation policy of the caves has undergone a number of profound changes. For instance, in 1976, the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science created a commission to study the state of the paintings of Altamira. As a result of the commission's report, the cave was closed to the public in June 1977 (Lasheras and Prada 2015). After that time, conservation policies were redesigned in order to maintain the environmental conditions in the caves, principally by strictly controlling the number of visitors. In 1982, Altamira was re-opened with a limit of 11,500 people per year. The inclusion of the cave in the World Heritage List in 1985 did not involve any significant changes in the conservation measures. However, the closure of the cave demonstrated the need to build a replica in its vicinity that could channel the flow of tourists and protect the original. This project became a reality in 2001. The following year, the authorities closed Altamira again as new concerns about the spread of microorganism on the walls of the cave arose (De las Heras 2020). Since then, only two more new caves with Paleolithic art have been opened to visitors: El Pendo, after the discovery of a large group of red paintings in 1997, and Cullalvera, where the monumental size of the cave is the main attraction, rather than its paintings.

In 2005, the autonomous community of Cantabria decided to facilitate the inscription of the caves of Northern Spain onto the World Heritage List, in conjunction with the communities of Asturias and the Basque Country, because of the extensive experience they had accumulated.

14.3.2 Ongoing Debates

Some positive outcomes have resulted from the inscription of the caves onto the World Heritage List (Ontañón Peredo and Rodríguez Asensio 2016). The protection areas (buffer zones) around the caves have been completed and infrastructure built around the World Heritage sites. In Cantabria, a new visitor center has been built near the caves of Monte Castillo, similar to the centers already existing at Ekain Cave in the Basque Country and Tito Bustillo Cave Art Center in Asturias. In terms of conservation, UNESCO requires national administrations to maintain unified management of the designated property. To fulfill this obligation, a joint commission of the Spanish Historical Heritage Council developed a management plan. At the same time, this commission coordinates the work of the different administrations involved: The State, the Autonomous Communities, and the Provinces. However, there are significant differences in the

management of these sites. For example, none of the inscribed Basque caves are open to the public for conservation reasons, whereas six caves are open in Asturias (and seven in Cantabria). These differences can be explained by their historical contexts. In fact, Cantabria enjoys a very long history of tourism associated with cave art. This has resulted in the creation of an economic network (restaurants, hotels, shops, etc.) built around cave art sites, but which is often opposed to any policy aimed at closing the caves to the public (De las Heras 2020).

That said, the inscription on the World Heritage List has consolidated a commitment to the conservation of the cave art, especially among the political agents. In 2008, the Head of Culture and Tourism in Cantabria expressed this idea in the following terms: "We are convinced that management decisions must be based on exclusively technical criteria oriented towards the conservation and the rational use of the resources [...] Although our deepest feelings might be different, we have to act responsibly with heritage" (García et al. 2011, II). Despite these good intentions, the management of the Cantabrian caves faces a number of challenges. These are not specific to these caves, but they take place within the regional context.

First, conservation measures and legal protections are often too vague and difficult to put into practice. For example, in 2017, only two of the Cantabrian caves on the World Heritage List (Altamira and La Garma) had enacted a preventive conservation plan with multi-disciplinary work teams (Dirección General de Cultura 2017, 33). Secondly, rock art research in this region is divided into two main fields: (1) Research on the conservation and documentation of cave art, and (2) research seeking to examine some specific aspects of rock art. Until now, this work has not been carried out as a coordinated effort, but has instead depended on the particular interests of research teams belonging to different institutions (from universities to research centers). In this regard, Cantabria Autonomous Community's administration is attempting to plan and coordinate the work, but it is not easy to overcome the inertia of an historically established research tradition (Dirección General de Cultura 2017, 36–37). Third, although seven caves are open to the public, this is not without problems. One of the main points of conflict lies in how to maintain public visits to those properties without jeopardizing the conservation of the paintings (Ontañón Peredo et al. 2014). The tourist demand on the caves has increased in the last two decades with the development of new forms of cultural-heritage tourism. In 2003, 64,570 people visited cave art sites in the region and, after they were listed as World Heritage sites, that number increased to 117,731 visitors in 2019. Most of the visitors come in the high and middle tourism seasons (from May to September), which coincides with the natural cycles of higher temperatures in the caves and their consequent influ-

ence on other parameters (humidity, CO₂, etc.) (Jurado et al. 2022). Some caves are receiving greater demand than others. For instance, in 2019, 48,200 people visited El Castillo but only 12,710 visited El Pendo. To change this would require the active generation of alternatives to reduce seasonality and avoid the concentration of visits to the better-known caves. In this regard, large caves like El Pendo, with a loading capacity much larger than the numbers of visitors it receives, should be promoted as tourist destinations, and pressure should be reduced in the case of smaller caves with more unstable micro-climate conditions, like Hornos de la Peña and Covalanas. In sum, there is a pressing need for redistributing the visitors.

Another serious challenge is that, aside from Altamira Museum, the region lacks the necessary cultural infrastructures required to alleviate visitor pressure on the caves, something that could increase the quality of the visits and multiply the economic benefits of heritage tourism without risking the conservation of the caves. The Interpretation Center currently being built at El Castillo is essential; similarly, a Cave Art Center should be developed at La Garma, and the small reception centers at other tourist caves should be improved.

Finally, a major impediment to the dissemination of Paleolithic art in Cantabria is the difficulty in attracting more international visitors. For example, of the 45,612 visitors at El Castillo Cave in 2019, 35,238 came from Spain, 7061 from other European countries, and only 3313 from other parts of the world. In this regard, strategies to promote this heritage at a global scale have been proposed as a key goal for the future (Dirección General de Cultura 2017, 58–59). This implies not only new policies (inclusion in European routes, international publicity campaigns, development of technology for the dissemination of heritage at a global level, etc.) but also the creation of an historical-scientific discourse that integrates Cantabrian Paleolithic art in a global context. This will require a new paradigm that considers the existence of different places in the world where Pleistocene art emerged and flourished.

14.4 Conclusions

The inclusion of a cultural property on the World Heritage List should be understood within the social context that underpins it (Logan 2012). In the case of the Paleolithic art of Northern Spain, this context is the result of a long history. The research, conservation, and dissemination of this archaeological heritage have been interwoven over time and shaped a complex framework of values and interests that have developed in a disorderly and unforeseeable way, following the flow of contemporary society. The need to research, explain, and conserve this prehistoric art has formed part of a general

process through which people in modern Western societies have constructed their individual and collective identities. A hybrid product has been generated between the prehistoric images and the use that contemporary culture makes of them. Unlike in other parts of the world, research and management of this prehistoric art has not needed to reconcile social contexts in which a state-based legal system has clashed against the traditional worldviews and ontologies that local populations held about their heritage (Mumma 2004). However, European societies are haunted by their own ghosts expressed in the form of nationalism and Eurocentrism. As this paper has shown, both have been present in the historical interpretation of Paleolithic art in Northern Spain (and in Europe in general). In particular, Eurocentrism nourished a dominant conception of these paintings and engravings as the oldest and most complex artistic and symbolic expressions of the Pleistocene. Furthermore, new ghosts have been added to those old ones by way of commercialization and spectacularization, both amplified by globalization. Thus, the dissemination of this heritage and the expansion of tourism have gone hand in hand over the last hundred years.

These realities have been projected onto the regional Paleolithic art at different levels. Their display as a spectacle in museums, replicas (physical or digital), and the interiors of the caves themselves have constructed and still construct the identity of the contemporary population. This has encouraged research to seek, demonstrate, and explain the oldest and greatest human achievements of the past, therefore transforming the Paleolithic art of Northern Spain into a symbol of the intellectual conquests of our species. This has generated and sustained the need to conserve this heritage, because it has become of significant value for the citizens. Undoubtedly, conservation requires funding, and the generation of such requires visitors to the sites.

The inscription of the caves in Northern Spain and the policies that have followed it form part of this framework of intellectual and material values. In this regard the issues that endanger Paleolithic art in this region are very similar to those in other parts of the world: first, a research agenda obsessed with highlighting the greatest antiquity and symbolic complexity of this phenomenon; second, a conservation in constant friction with the right of the public to know and enjoy this heritage; and third, a public image of cave art subject to risks of banalization, owing to marketing strategies that generate a superficial and acritical vision of the past (Baram and Rowan 2004). Slogans constantly repeated in guidebooks and tourist leaflets create simplistic clichés by presenting Paleolithic paintings and engravings as a “journey to a Cantabria full of mystery, at the dawn of art and symbolic thought” (Dirección General de Turismo del Gobierno de Cantabria 2008: 3). Consequently, in the new context wherein research has discovered the existence of different centers in the world where Pleistocene images emerged and

developed, we must reconsider our public discourse on the Paleolithic art of Northern Spain and all of Europe. Broaching plural narratives implies complex conversations that avoid reductionist interpretations of the past.

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Eduardo Palacio Pérez works as Curator for the Government of Cantabria (Spain), and he is lecturer at the National Distance Education University (UNED) in Cantabria. His research focuses on two main areas: the history of archaeology and rock art. In particular, his main interest is centered on a critical reflection on how Paleolithic images have been conceptualized since their discovery at the end of the nineteenth century until nowadays. Currently, he takes part in different projects aimed at the documentation, conservation, and dissemination of Cantabrian rock art. He has extensively published on the history of archaeology, with a particular interest in the theory, methodology, and history of Paleolithic art research.

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