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Press Release

How the lion got his head back

Tübingen archaeologists find “new” fragment of Ice Age lion – now displayed at the University of Tübingen Museum

Tübingen, 30 July 2014

Archaeologists from the University of Tübingen have found an ancient fragment of ivory belonging to a 40,000 year old animal figurine. Both pieces were found in the Vogelherd Cave in southwestern Germany, which has yielded a number of remarkable works of art dating to the Ice Age. The mammoth ivory figurine depicting a lion was discovered during excavations in 1931. The new fragment makes up one side of the figurine’s head, and the sculpture may be viewed at the Tübingen University Museum from 30 July.

“The figurine depicts a lion,” says Professor Nicholas Conard of Tübingen University’s Institute of Prehistory and Medieval Archaeology, and the Senckenberg Center for Human Evolution and Palaeoenvironment Tübingen. “It is one of the most famous Ice Age works of art, and until now, we thought it was a relief, unique among these finds dating to the dawn of figurative art. The reconstructed figurine clearly is a three dimensional sculpture.”

The new fragment was discovered when today’s archaeologists revisited the work of their predecessors from the 1930s. “We have been carrying out renewed excavations and analysis at Vogelherd Cave for nearly ten years,” says Conard. “The site has yielded a wealth of objects that illuminate the development of early symbolic artifacts dating to the period when modern humans arrived in Europe and displaced the indigenous Neanderthals.” He points out that the Vogelherd Cave has provided evidence of the world’s earliest art and music and is a key element in the push to make the caves of the Swabian Jura a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Vogelherd is one of four caves in the region where the world’s earliest figurines have been found, dating back to 40,000 years ago. Several dozen figurines and fragments of figurines have been found in the Vogelherd alone, and researchers are piecing together thousands of mammoth ivory fragments.

The new-look lion can be seen at the University Museum in Hohentübingen Castle, Wed.-Sun., 10am – 5pm; and Thursdays 10am – 7pm.

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The fragment on the left makes up half the head of the animal figure on the right, showing that the “lion” was fully three-dimensional, and not a relief as long thought. Photo: Hilde Jensen, Universität Tübingen