



Press release

Two bird figurines found in World Heritage Site of Hohle Fels are declared „Find of the Year”

Archaeologists from the University of Tübingen identify a unique signature in miniature works of Ice Age art

Tübingen, July 29, 2026

Excavations at Hohle Fels Cave in the UNESCO World Heritage area of the Swabian Jura of southwestern Germany have again yielded two, spectacular 40,000-year-old depictions of birds carved from mammoth ivory. The two figurines are the smallest discovered so far and are the size of a thumbnail, while still including many details. These remarkable finds come from the rich Aurignacian layers at Hohle Fels, which have produced some of the oldest figurative art known, and date to the time of the initial arrival of modern humans in the Upper Danube region. One find is complete and perhaps depicts a brooding bird, while the other incomplete bird has outstretched wings and may be in flight or landing.

In 2025, archaeologists from the University of Tübingen, Germany, recovered the birds in the same layer lying about 1.5 meters away from each other. They are of similar age and may perhaps have been carved by the same person. “The figurines demonstrate that the earliest artists were skilled ivory-carvers, who could depict delicate motifs in miniature form. Additionally, it seems that specific depictions are associated with specific sites,” says the director of excavations from the University of Tübingen, Professor Nicholas Conard.

The newly discovered birds are extremely small with dimensions of approximately 2 x 1 x 0.5 cm. Most of the other figurines from this period have dimensions in the range of 3 to 9 cm. The resting bird is depicted in great detail with prominent eyes, while the bird with outstretched wings has a distinctive beak and clear markings representing feathers. “The carvings are not highly stylized but instead include many specific and unique features,” says Conard. “Here the artist has recorded detailed observations that allow us to consider which kind of bird is represented and what the bird could be doing.”

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**Museum of Prehistory
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Although many of the early ivory carvings from the caves of the Swabian Jura depict animals in a static manner with considerable tension, the two birds are shown in specific postures. One of the birds appears to be lying on the ground and could well be brooding over its eggs. The bird with spread wings may be flying, landing, or perhaps posturing in courtship. Ice Age art often leaves multiple avenues of interpretation open, and the same applies for the specific kind of bird depicted. The brooding bird appears to be a ptarmigan, a species that is well-represented in the rich faunal material recovered from Hohle Fels. The bird with spread wings could be a ptarmigan but could also be a bird in the grouse family or a bird of prey.

Feather light

“The figurines in their present state weigh only 1.3 and 0.7 grams and are the smallest and finest depictions from this period 40,000-years-ago,” notes Conard, the scientific director of the Museum of Prehistory and Ice Age Art (urmu), “but despite their size, they raise many new questions.” Among the open questions are what meaning they could have had for the residents of Hohle Fels Cave. They could have served as personal talismans or as symbols for the identity of the person who carved or carried the diminutive sculptures. Hohle Fels has now yielded a total of three carefully made carvings, while no other site in the region has produced a single bird figurine. At the same time, depictions of other animals are numerous, with mammoths and lions being the most frequently presented, followed by smaller numbers of bears, horses, fish, and bison. Conard argues that “Each of the four World Heritage sites that have yielded figurative art is unique and documents a link between the site, its specific geographic and social context.”

The figurines will be on display at the Museum of Prehistory and Ice Age Art in Blaubeuren (urmu) in a special exhibit that runs until April 4, 2027 entitled: Feather light, research heavy: Discover the miniature birds in Ice Age Art. “Our region and landscape have always been the home of a vast range of birds, and nearby Lake Schmiechen is today a bird sanctuary,” says Stefanie Kölbl, the managing director of urmu. “Even 40,000-years-ago birds were here. Their song filled the air, and some species came to the region in the course of annual migrations. Their calls signaled warnings, and the residents of the region often used their hollow bones and even mammoth ivory to make flutes that produced magical sounds.”

The urmu is located among the region’s caves that were inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2017 under the title: “Caves and Ice Age Art of the Swabian Jura.” Founded more than 60 years ago, this research museum of the University of Tübingen has long displayed the renowned Paleolithic artifacts of southwestern Germany together with the oldest figurative art and musical instruments dating back to 40,000 years ago. The urmu houses exceptional finds such as the Venus of Hohle Fels.

Address:

Museum für Urgeschichte und Eiszeitkunst (urmu)
Kirchplatz 10
89143 Blaubeuren
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Opening hours in the summer: Tuesday to Sunday and public holidays, 10 am to 5 pm –
www.urmu.de

Publication:

Nicholas J. Conard, Alexander Janas, Mohsen Zeidi: Hochwertige Funde aus dem Mittelpaläolithikum und zwei aurignacienzeitliche Vogeldarstellungen aus dem Hohle Fels bei Schelklingen.

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Depiction of a lying bird from the Ice Age site of Hohle Fels, approximately 40,000 years old
Photo: Ralf Ehmann, University of Tübingen



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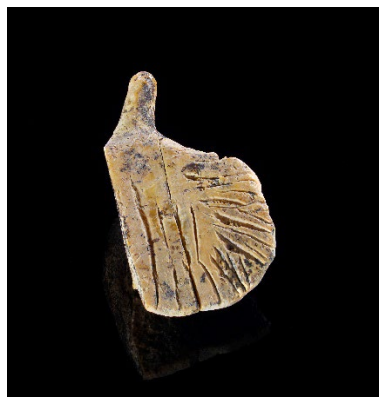
Depiction of a lying bird from the Ice Age site of Hohle Fels, approximately 40,000 years old
Photo: Ralf Ehmman, University of Tübingen



Depiction of a bird with outstretched wings from the site Hohle Fels Cave, approximately 40,000 years old
Photo: Ralf Ehmman, University of Tübingen



Depiction of a bird with outstretched wings from the site Hohle Fels Cave, approximately 40,000 years old
Photo: Ralf Ehmman, University of Tübingen



Back view of a bird figurine from site of Hohle Fels Cave: The parallel markings on the wings depict the plumage, approximately 40,000 years old
Photo: Ralf Ehmman, University of Tübingen



Two bird figurines carved from ivory found at the site of Hohle Fels Cave, approximately 40,000 years old
Photo: Ralf Ehmman, University of Tübingen;
Graphics: urmu



Excavations at the UNESCO World Heritage Site Hohle Fels in 2025
Photo: Mohsen Zeidi, University of Tübingen



Cave hall of Hohle Fels
Photo: Jens Burkert; Copyright: Weltkultursprung



Hohle Fels near the town of Schelklingen (Southern Germany)
Photo: Jens Burkert; Copyright: Weltkultursprung

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