

The Lady and the *Lionmen*

An Experimental Study in Body Language of the Upper Palaeolithic Anthropomorphic Figurines of Hohle Fels Cave, Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave and Geissenklösterle Cave, Swabian Jura

Abstract All known anthropomorphic figurines from the Upper Palaeolithic display specific postures: they show body language. In 2010/11, an experimental study was conducted involving a group of twelve professional German actors and an independent group of four Vietnamese students.

This empirical approach – intended as a first step towards a more representative study – uses one of the traditional practices of professional acting to break down the enigma of a character into discernible communicational building blocks. The results around the emotional significance of the figurines were strikingly consistent between both groups. They generally underline mainstream academic interpretation of the Aurignacian figurines as representations of power and dominance (Hahn 1986). The analysis of the figurines' gestural composition though, allows some divergent or hitherto overlooked information to be gathered. The paper concentrates on the results given for the anthropomorphic figurines of Hohle Fels, Hohlenstein-Stadel and Geissenklösterle, three caves in the Swabian Jura, Germany.

Keywords body language, Upper Palaeolithic, anthropomorphic figurines, experiment, female figurine, *Lionman*, *Adorant*, Hohle Fels, Geissenklösterle, Hohlenstein-Stadel

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Introduction

All Upper Palaeolithic figurines, be it animal or human, display body language. Gestures and movements are key to communicating with conspecifics. The body language we use to navigate through our social surroundings is influenced by multiple factors like culture and gender, social class, education, clothing style, etc., but its basis is a set of universal elements¹ that form part of our intrinsic nonverbal communication system as *homo sapiens*. (Tomasello 2008, 60ff.; Watzlawick et al. 1967, 63f.). All these factors combine to shape our bodies and our capacity for emotional expression.

While the purely physical functions for us humans as a species are always the same, perception of the ‘body within the world’ and redefinition of gestural meaning vary across cultures. Our sedentary lifestyles are maximally distant from those of the mobile hunter-gatherers of the Upper Palaeolithic (Borić et al. 2013, 34f.). Different lifestyles shape fundamentally different ways of thinking, feeling and the expression of a perceived reality (Lévy-Strauss 1962). The key question is: can we grasp at least fragments of communicational events which took place in cultures lost to us? Our nonverbal communication system is one of the key elements to form a theory of mind. Although their physical presence is long perished, Upper Palaeolithic people left gestural traces *frozen*, as it were, into their figurative art. If we apply two renowned hypotheses: firstly, every artistic behaviour is a communicational act (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1984, 923f.; Haidle 2009, 242–43) and secondly, all works of art elicit emotional responses (Gell 1989), then the answer is a tentative yes.

Performing Arts have developed and honed a series of mental and physical techniques in order to understand, built and reproduce syntax and semantics of gestures through emphatic understanding and close imitation². We humans have the special ability to observe ourselves through inner distancing (self-monitoring) while interacting with our surrounding. This particularly human capacity can be compared to a two-part mirror, reflecting and integrating the image(s) of one side into the image(s) of the other and vice versa. Every work of art is such an instance of ‘double mirroring’. Any work of art is human-made reflecting a human mind. Other characteristics of all art are their amazing longevity and the flexibility with regard to interpretation. Best examples are the numerous exhibitions and discussions around Palaeolithic art. Resurrected after millennia, Palaeolithic art attracts, fascinates and at the same time frustrates any attempt to objectively grasp the artefacts’ ‘original’ meaning. Moreover, although they keep puzzling us, we discover in them – as happens with all artistic work – facets of significance that speak to our very present.

Unfortunately, we also almost inevitably inscribe our own culturally groomed notions into prehistoric art: in order to sidestep this trap as best as possible, the experimental setup excluded any questions around gender roles, social³ status or

1 For a discussion on two types of basic human gesturing: pointing (directing attention) and pantomiming (directing imagination) see Tomasello 2008, chapter 3.

2 According to Michael Tomasello, close imitation is a central learning method of our species in order to pass on cultural achievements which accumulate from generation to generation: he termed it the “ratchet effect” (Tomasello 2008, 29 after Tomasello et al. 1993)

3 Social status, which is mainly shaped by one’s functions within society, is different from individually perceived (personal) status.

metaphysical meaning. Gender roles in particular are fraught with almost inextricable cultural bias and very difficult to view in a detached, open manner.

In the sections below, the experimental setup is described in short terms⁴. Summaries of the results on the figurines' body language are followed by a chapter discussing some alternative interpretations of the postures and the role of space as agent. These considerations are briefly summed up at the end.

The Figurines' Body Language

The Experimental Setup

This investigative approach is a first tentative step into a completely new direction of studying prehistoric anthropomorphic artefacts. It is not a representative study on which to ground a robust hypothesis yet. More tests would be necessary and a range of cultural aspects should be taken into consideration. The initial experiment studied five figurines from the Upper Palaeolithic. This paper concentrates on the three Aurignacian figurines from the Swabian Jura:

- a) The female figurine of Hohle Fels Cave (Conard 2009a) (Fig. 1)
- b) The Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave therianthrop, or *Lionman* (Hahn 1970) (Fig. 2)
- c) The Geissenklösterle Cave half-relief or *Adorant* (Hahn 1988) (Fig. 3)

All three figurines are carved from mammoth ivory. Also, all three of them are associated with the oldest Aurignacian levels of their respective sites: The *Hohle Fels Lady* at approx. 42 ka calBP (Conard 2009a; Floss 2015, 7 after Higham et al. 2012), the Geissenklösterle *Adorant* at approx. 41–43 ka calBP (Hahn 1988, 36; Higham et al. 2012) and the *Lionman* at 39–41 ka calBP (Wehrberger 1994; Kind et al. 2014, 133).

Professional actors are familiar with the process of investigating gestures and postures⁵ and can consciously reflect and reproduce their emotional impact. In 2010 and 2011, an experimental study was conducted involving a group of twelve professional German actors and an independent group of four Vietnamese students (Schebesch 2013). The German group consisted of six male and six female actors of various ages. The Vietnamese group included 2 male and 2 female young adult students. The Vietnamese part of the experiment was led by the author's colleague, Beverly Blankenship, and took place in Hanoi.

Each participant was questioned separately. First, photographs and a posture sketch of the respective figurine was presented, then the participant was asked to imitate the posture as closely as possible. After a few moments of adjustment in order to let the associated emotion(s) surface, five basic questions were asked:

- Extrovert or introvert? (Is your attention directed outward or inward?)

4 For a detailed discussion of the experimental setup and the theoretical background of the theatrical techniques applied, see Schebesch 2013, 70–72.

5 Posture comprises the whole physical information emanating from a body in a given moment, while gestures are performed through parts of the body.

- What is your personal status? (In contrast to social status this is about self-esteem.)
- What kind of space are you in? (Space is always significant.)
- Can you imagine other beings there? If so, how many?
- What emotions do you feel coming up? (Emotions⁶ are almost never pure and distinctly separated but merge with each other.)

In order to sidestep any preconceived ideas as to the symbolic meaning of the figurines, no contextual information was given. All participants were explicitly asked to disregard the figurines' sex.

Results

1 The Lady of Hohle Fels Cave

Generally, this figurine's posture evoked good, positive feelings of self-esteem and sensuality (See table 1, Fig. 1). Some inhibition was perceived in the arm position, a protective or self-protective component was reported. The focus was mainly perceived as directed outwards, with alert senses and an inclination for interaction with the environment. Status was generally judged to be high, except once where the protective component was perceived as dominant. Some of the female participants voluntarily expressed a very positive sensation of sensual femininity: "I feel sexy."

Table 1 | Summary of the participants'7 comments for the *Lady of Hohle Fels* (see Fig.1)

	Majority	Minority	Additional remarks
Extrovert or introvert?	Extrovert to very extrovert	Also, possibility of introvert considered (1)	There is a protective component
Personal status?	Generally high status	Low status but contextually dependent. (2)	Also perceived as domineering
What kind of space?	Stoic but watchful, generally wide perception of environment	Very much alive, like "budding spring" (1) Exposed (1) Closed in (1)	"At peace" or "peaceful" was mentioned several times
Any communicational partner(s)?	Inclined to dialogue with others and self, gently provocative	(2) perceived as distanced	The inflated ribcage may be read as aggressive
Emotional complex	Self-confident, powerful, very erotic	Defensive but still down-to-earth (1)	Like "the Earth"

6 Specific gestures are often associated with 'their' specific emotions. Gestures evoke emotions, and vice versa. Notwithstanding, there is a wide motor spectrum covering an emotion. Additionally, there are always cultural influences to consider. For a comprehensive discussion concerning the link between gesture and emotion from the performer's point of view, see Čechov 1990.

7 Numbers in brackets in the section 'Minority' are the number of participants who proposed the aspect. Both groups' answers are combined here.



Fig. 1 | Top row: Left: The original figurine *Lady of Hohle Fels* (Universität Tübingen, photo: Hilde Jensen). Right: posture sketch. Bottom row: Video stills of participants imitating the posture⁸.

2 The *Lionman*, Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave

In contrast to Joachim Hahn's interpretation as a static posture with hanging arms (Hahn 1986, 195), the figurine called *Löwenmensch* (*Lionman*) evoked a feeling of high muscular tension about to erupt into intense dynamic action. The posture radiated physical power that may be interpreted as aggressive or dance-like. A dynamic focus was perceived with a readiness to communicate with others. An intention to seize something or to reach out towards an imaginative goal was also detected. One participant who had been an Olympic gymnast strongly associated this posture with the initial stance before springing into action. The status was generally assumed to be high, with well-developed self-esteem. Attention is directed outward into the surroundings (see table 2, Fig. 2).

⁸ Due to technical problems with the conversion of the original video, the still images can only be displayed slightly distorted.

Table 2 | Summary of the participants’ comments for the *Lionman*, Hohlenstein-Stadel (see Fig. 2)

	Majority	Minority	Additional remarks
Extrovert or introvert?	Extrovert, very dynamic		High muscle tension, aggressive or dance-like about to erupt into action
Personal status?	High to very high status	Straining for high status, ambitious (2)	
What kind of space?	Moving forward, outward into environment		Pace setter, intense focus directed towards a goal
Any communicational partner(s)?	Will or readiness for communicating with others		Standing alone, lonely, or being singled out
Emotional complex	Alert, powerful, goal-oriented, high self-esteem	Very aggressive, “something is wrong” (1)	Joy of fighting, Capoeira-like



Fig. 2 | Top row: Left: Original *Lionman* (© Landesamt für Denkmalpflege im RP Stuttgart und Museum Ulm, photo: Yvonne Mühleis). Right: Posture sketch of the *Lionman*. Bottom row: Video stills of participants engaged in the posture.

3 The Half-Relief *Adorant* of Geissenklösterle Cave

This figurine was perceived as deliberately ambivalent in its intentions with a range of associations, from ‘mage’ to ‘victim’. The posture was described as expansive. The presence of one or more imaginary counterparts were felt, also a tendency to communicate with ‘someone outside’. Various status levels from high to low were offered with several actors suggesting ambivalent or context-dependent status. The not unambiguous gesture of the hands, whether fists or open palms, were felt as decisive for interpretation. The two Vietnamese male students were positively confident of a high status and a sensation of great power. The extremely open posture strongly influences breathing. The muscle tonus was perceived as very high, especially through the position of the open legs. Unfortunately, much of the figurine’s surface is damaged, which frustrates any further detailing (see table 3, Fig. 3).

Table 3 | Summary of the participants comments for Geissenklösterle Cave half-relief (see Fig. 3)

	Majority	Minority	Additional remarks
Extrovert or introvert?	Ambiguous, very much context dependent, either very high or very low	Very extrovert (4)	Difference between German and Vietnamese groups: Vietnamese: very extrovert
Personal status?	Ambiguous: either very high or very low.	Vietnamese: very high status	
What kind of space?	Huge space afforded, very dynamic, to all sides		Between the worlds; liminal being, expansive gesture comprising or connecting heaven and earth
Any communicational partner(s)?	Inviting interaction, intensely dynamic	“Not here”, maybe communication with another realm(2)	
Emotional complex	Very open gesture, sensitive areas like solar plexus and genitalia unprotected – open perception but no consensus as to what end: fear, joy, pride, defensiveness, high alertiveness,	Difference between front (vulnerable) and back (hard=“armoured”) (2) Threatened (1) or being punished, victim (2)	Great range of action: triumph, fighting, dancing, also submission, high Adrenalin; which gesture of hands: clenched fists? Open palms?

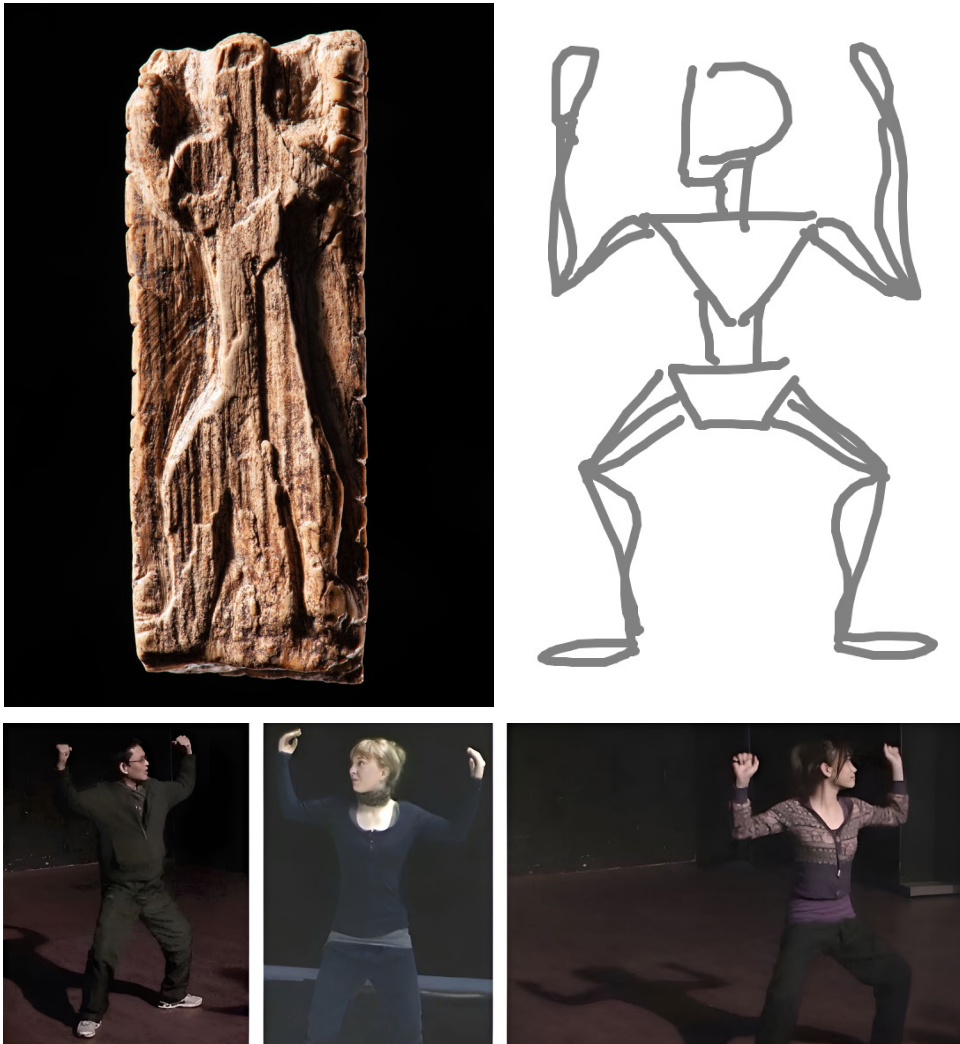


Fig. 3 | Left: Geissenklösterle half-relief *Adorant* (Landesmuseum Württemberg, photo: Hendrick Zwietasch). Right: Posture sketch. In retrospect the posture sketch is not fully accurate as it does not show the asymmetry of the stance. Bottom row: video stills of participants as *Adorant*. Note the shadow on the ground in the left and right stills.

Some Further Aspects

Reading gestures – particularly isolated gestures or postures appertaining to an unknown cultural context – yield only a small range of valid results as there is nothing but the face-value impression to go with. The study of nonverbal communication through body language is currently met with great scientific interest across a range of disciplines, yet to the best of the author's knowledge it has never been applied to the study of palaeolithic or prehistoric figurative art.

There are practice-oriented professions such as professional acting or criminal investigation, where the acquirement of empirical knowledge of body language on

a day-to-day basis is key. But the contextual embedment of nonverbal behaviour remains a crucial factor to a correct reading of gestural clues in communication. Although body language plays a vital part in all social interaction (Goffman 1967; Tomasello 2008), one might argue that the study of body language will hardly ever attain the status of hard science – the subject being dependent on too many parameters. Once the original situational context is lost, we are left with a whole range of plausible interpretations, yet the *original* meaning will escape us. Interpretation will depend on how the individual researcher reconstructs the constellation of known factors. Also formal aspects – size, material and chosen medium – will inevitably elicit a variety of gestural responses from spectators as well, the analysis of which might prove informative. For example, a tiny figurine like the Geissenklösterle half-relief or the *Lady of Hohle Fels* can be viewed by only one or maybe a few people at once, while the *Lionman* is big enough to be exhibited to a crowd. In both cases the spectators' attitudes will differ considerably. Yet, these figurines have two important particularities in common: They are portable and they are made of a highly durable material: mammoth ivory. They can be passed on and travel with different owners or may be handed down through generations. Cave paintings on the other hand elicit utterly different gestural responses and attitudes (Clottes 2011, 175ff.). So, even if the proper cultural narrative, the *original* meaning as it were, behind these works of art is lost, a comprehensive gestural study delivers different possible scenarios from which in turn valuable basic clues as to their initially intended social function can be gathered.

The *Lady of Hohle Fels*

The Air of Confidence and the Position of Arms: Self-awareness or Protection?

At first glance, the figurine is all breasts, upper torso and pelvis: No head, no feet or legs, apart from thigh stumps. The back is clearly worked out with very flat buttocks. In order to imitate her stance, one has to draw the shoulder blades back and together. At the same time the chest opens up thus allowing for more intake of air. The 'air of confidence' as it were. This movement is counterbalanced by arms held close to the body with bent elbows. The hands, palms flat with closed fingers, lie on both sides of the lower part of the ribcage. Criminal investigators describe this as a self-grooming gesture indicative of emotional tension (Navarro 2019). Some participants interpreted the closely held arms as self-protective. Does it also have an (auto-)erotic undertone? The hands do not touch the breasts, yet several participants commented on the figurine's perceived erotic confidence. In this context, the self-soothing gestures of the upper extremities add an aspect of self-containment, a gentle limitation of the emotional dazzle. Only one participant considered the portrayed age, although no questions were asked in that direction. That participant felt being reminded of very young women symbolizing the "frothing glory of budding spring" (personal communication). Any assessment of the intended age carries a notion of the speculative. Nevertheless, the best indication for age are the prominent, high breasts which could be either swelling with milk – Dr. Gaëlle Rosendahl associated the figurine with "moments of blissful exhaustion after giving birth" (personal communication via phone) – or they may be due to the youthful, elastic tissue of a body in good shape. If the figurine was originally meant to be reclining – despite being probably worn as a pendant – this would also



Fig. 4 | Hohle Fels figurine detail of lower abdomen with deeper incisions. Left: original (Universität Tübingen, photo Hilde Jensen). Below: two detail shots of a replica. Mark the difference between the meticulous horizontal lines on the abdomen and the deep cuts marking the vulva in front running up in a slight angle.



account for the high breasts. In that case, the air of physical firmness conveyed by the strong torso and the plump arms is indicative of a pleasantly relaxed muscle tonus and the figurine's flat back and non-existent buttocks are a formal convenience.

Incisions: Working Gestures of Varying Intensity?

Like all artworks of the Swabian Aurignacian, she is covered with engraved signs. Many explanations as to the meaning of the incised patterns on the Aurignacian figurines have been offered (Dutkiewicz 2021; Floss 2007; Hodgson 2006; Müller-Beck and Holdermann 2001a, 59–63). A discussion as to what they may signify is beyond the scope of this paper⁹. However, two different kinds of the artisan's and/or the owner(s)¹⁰ gestural traces can be observed: The majority of 'smooth' patterns cover the whole torso and arms. There are also incisions on the lower abdomen which seem to have been carved with stronger pressure leaving deeper traces: Left and right of the navel there are two

⁹ For an extensive discussion on the subject see: Dutkiewicz 2021. *Zeichen: Markierungen, Muster und Symbole im Schwäbischen Aurignacien*. Tübingen: Kerns.

¹⁰ In 2015 the author visited the collection of African art at the British Museum. With one particular puppet-like exhibit there was a short explanatory text which drew the author's attention. To paraphrase it from memory: As long as the artefact was being used and reworked, it played a fixed role in the community's social life. Once people stopped handling and reworking it, its 'life' had expired and it was either thrown away or buried. This anecdotal footnote serves to illustrate the diversity of social functions ascribed to works of art.

indentations. On the right side there is a bigger, deep triangular notch, on the left a smaller hole, both going deeper than the navel. The symmetry suggests intention.

The cleft depicting the vulva shows particularly deep incisions as if having been repeatedly and vigorously worked upon (see Fig. 4). Varying pressure in gestural traces may simply be a matter of working the hard material, but it may also be indicative of emotive impulses intensifying the crafter's movements. It may imply a variety of very different impulses: from aggression to highlighting the area as special.

No Head and Many Faces

There is a puzzling particularity: The figurine has no head. Instead, there is an eyelet slightly to the right of the centre. Traces of wear suggest its use as a pendant (Conard 2009b, 269). The human head is not only the seat of 'me' – four of our five senses lie in the head plus, of course, the brain, the organ for processing all information. When worn as a pendant, an interesting phenomenon occurs: the wearer lends an ever-cocked head and face to the *Hohle Fels Lady's* body. From the gestural point of view the slight asymmetry translates into a gently mocking but friendly attention towards an interactive partner. As she could have been handed down from wearer to wearer, one might say the Lady doesn't have a head but many faces. There is also the possibility that the head had been damaged and the figurine was reworked or a now lost head of different material was fixed above the loop (Stannard and Langley 2020). Another striking feature is her nudity, which applies to the majority of Upper Palaeolithic anthropomorphic depictions¹¹ (Schebesch 2015, 63). Academic discussion oscillates between the metaphorical and the biological: as a symbol of fertility and motherhood (Conard 2013a, 138), as the "reproductive sexuality ... not erotic" (Cook 2013, 38) or the biologically motivated, hormonally induced sexual impulses (Guthrie 2005, 304ff.). But neither the metaphor nor the overtly erotic are mutually exclusive (see also Conard 2014a, 132–38).

The *Lionman*, Hohlenstein-Stadel

The Gesture of Being Ready for Action

Standing at 31.1 cm and carved out of the right tusk of a young or female mammoth (Ebinger-Rist and Wolf 2013) the *Lionman* cuts a particularly impressive figure among the generally much smaller figurines of the Swabian Jura. The archaeotechnician Wulf Hein, an expert in experimental archaeology, attempted to replicate the *Lionman* using original tools (Hein and Wehrberger 2010). He invested 360 working hours of hard work (Hein 2018, 440). From this, one may conclude that the Aurignacian artisan had to be a skilled crafter. Skilled craftsmen usually don't leave anything to chance. Thus, one may assume that every aspect of the *Lionman* was premeditated and fully intentional. It is very unfortunate that the figurine is so fragmented. Large parts of the surface are missing with the genital area no longer intact except a small triangular platelet which shows traces of handling. The figurine's overall shape though, is suggestive of a male. Wherever preserved, the surfaces show traces of much handling (Ebinger-Rist et al. 2013, 69).

11 For a comprehensive overview of anthropomorphic figurative art of the Upper Palaeolithic see: Cohen 2003, Delporte 1979 and Guthrie 2005.

The figurine's dynamic attitude derives from the level head, the squared shoulders and the slight inward curve of the long body. In order to physically imitate this inward curve, one has to engage the middle section of the abdominal musculature. The back muscles function as antagonists by elongating and thus creating the sensation of a 'drawn bow'. The high tonus of the squared shoulders, neck and chest muscles also translate into the arm muscles right down to the fingertips. One of the participants who had been an Olympic gymnast, identified this stance as the "moment before springing into action" (personal communication). Two participants with a background of martial arts equally described this stance as 'being about to engage'. The interpretation of the *Lionman*'s upper extremities as feline (Ebinger-Rist et al. 2013, 68) does not influence the gestural reproduction.

The Gestures of Audiences: Orienting the Figurine in Space

At first sight the *Lionman* seems to be 'drawn out' like Giacometti's statuettes (Fig. 5). This is effected by the very long torso fitting more the proportions of a great cat than a human being. The figurine is a mix between a felid, very likely a lion, in the upper body and a human from the navel down. The sturdy legs are nicely worked with ankles, calves and hollows of knees. The feet are flexed downward as if the figurine is standing on the balls of the feet. The *Lionman* cannot stand on its own, which begs the



Fig. 5 | A. Giacometti with one of his bronze sculptures. Biennale, Venice, 1962. (Photo: Erhard Wehrmann. Kunststiftung Poll, CC BY-SA 3.0 DE <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.en>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

question as to his spacial orientation. Was he propped up on a support e.g. a wall? He would squarely face his audience then. In theatre this is known as a supreme status stance or 'king's attitude'. Or was he laid down? In which case lateral supports would be needed. Here, the spatial orientation seems rather at odds with his perceived status: a cradled *Lionman* reminiscent of a new born child.

There is a third option: The *Lionman* is fashioned out of a section of mammoth defense where the nerve canal runs centrally from the top of the head through the body ending in the crotch (Ebinger-Rist and Wolf 2013, 57). The fragmented figurine was excavated from the back part of Hohlenstein-Stadel cave together with a part of a left mammoth defense and sections of reindeer antlers (Wehrberger 1994, 42). Hohlenstein-Stadel cave is not particularly deep, therefore not completely dark, but if you consider a suspension with additional lighting by fire, the effect might have been dramatic. Was he suspended in the cave? One can imagine the *Lionman* floating above ground in flickering fire light, his shadow dancing on the walls. All three possibilities involve 'preparing a space' for him. His unusually big dimensions for Aurignacian figurines suggest a somewhat prominent function attracting a 'bigger audience'.

The Geissenklösterle Half-Relief *Adorant*

Asymmetry

Symmetry gives us the aesthetic pleasure of balance. Asymmetrical things, movements or gestures on the other hand, instantly attract our interest. We actively watch anything asymmetrical or moving because there *might be something coming that we don't see yet*. This coarse generalization aims to highlight one of the particularities of the Geissenklösterle figurine:

It is asymmetrical in its stance (Müller-Beck and Holdermann 2001a, 49). The right leg is a bit longer than the left and slightly more bent at the knee (see Fig. 3). The left side appears to be straighter. Also, the raised right arm seems to be bigger and somewhat lower than the left. This asymmetry invokes the impression of perspective. Müller-Beck and Holdermann describe this movement "... as if the figure is about to step out onto the right side. ... [the expansive stance is a] ... greeting into the distance" interpreted as a "gesture of adoration" (Müller-Beck and Holdermann 2001a, 49f.) in accordance with the figurine's familiar nickname *Adorant*. Due to the small dimensions of the ivory badge, the apparent perspective could be a product of chance. Intended perspective or not, the asymmetry adds to the figurine's dynamic expression. A quite similar but symmetrical posture can be detected in Iron Age daggers with anthropomorphic handles. Equally expansive in gesturing, the high symmetry of the dagger handles' anthropomorphic shapes suggests a more ceremonial and static stance (Glunz-Hüsken and Schebesch 2015, 308). In contrast, the Geissenklösterle figurine is *being engaged* in a sweeping gesture occupying or conquering the space around it.

Gesture of Audience: How Close?

The badge-like half-relief is diminutive with its 3.8 cm by 1.4 cm. It easily fits into the palm of a hand (Fig. 6). In order to comfortably view the sweeping little figurine one has to bring the hand relatively close to one's face. Only one or two 'spectators' can regard it at a time. Was it coloured? The excavator Joachim Hahn noticed traces of



Fig. 6 | A replica of the *Adorant* in the author's hand.

ochre and manganese on it (Hahn 1988, 36). The relief's function is unknown. If one were to observe someone regarding the figurine, it is a rather intimate gesture. Was it meant to trigger associations or memories?

Clues and Links Between *Adorant* and *Lionman*: A Significant Myth?

The half-relief was discovered in the Aurignacian layer IIb in an area of bone ashes (Hahn 1986, 36). Although the surface is damaged, the half-relief is not a fragment as such: the frame is worked. There are fine horizontal incisions running around the frame and on the back there are four vertical rows of 13 incised points. Whether these incised dots are a calendrical counting (Müller-Beck and Holdermann 2001b, 65) or of another significance escapes our knowledge. Nevertheless they are part of a series of clues that link the *Adorant* to the anthropomorphic figurine fragment *Löwenmenschle* (*little Lionman*) of Vogelherd Cave (Riek 1934) with its incised three vertical rows of 9 picks, very upright posture and feline-shaped head, which in turn links to the *Lionman* and to the diminutive *little Lionman*¹² (Conard 2003, 830; Conard 2014b, 139) with an equally upright, proud posture, feline-shaped head and broad shoulders; viewed together, similarities can be detected (Hahn 1986, 191) despite differences in height and quality of crafting (Fig. 7). The lion is a universal symbol of strength and power, stored in folk biology as the 'essence of lion' (Wynn et al. 2009, 77). One may assume that the half-relief of Geissenklösterle cave is also a *Lionman* depiction (Fig. 6). Hahn (1986, 196) interprets the figurine's head as looking straight ahead, therefore dubbing it *Adorant*. He also highlights the high probability of it being another *Lionman*. The Aurignacians' preference for feline predators (Delpaep 2009, 152) corroborates this possibility. In short, four figurines with striking similarities to each other were found in the caves of the Swabian Jura. As N. Conard (2013b, 139) points out, there is only a slim chance of finding *one* such figurine. The discovery of four within a relatively small area could be a clue as to a significant cultural '*Lionman* myth' of the Aurignacian in the Swabian Jura.

¹² Excavated by N. Conard in 2002. The figurine, only 2.5 cm high, was found in Aurignacian layer IV.



Fig. 7 | Four Aurignacian anthropomorphic figurines of the Swabian Jura: four *Lionmen*? (Not to scale: *Lionman* from Hohlenstein-Stadel – Landesamt für Denkmalpflege im RP Stuttgart und Museum Ulm, photo: Yvonne Mühleis; figurine from Vogelherd – Universität Tübingen, photo: Hilde Jensen; figurine from Hohle Fels – Universität Tübingen, photo: Hilde Jensen; *Adorant* from Geißenklösterle – Landesmuseum Württemberg, photo: Hendrick Zwietasch)

The *Adorant*'s Unusual Stance: Three Possibilities

Like the *Lionman*, the Geissenklösterle half-relief has an exaggeratedly long body, a proportionally small, cat-shaped head and – as far as one can guess – bulging upper arms and a broad chest. The similarities don't end here: The raised arms of the *Adorant* bear six horizontal incisions on the left arm, the damaged surface of the right arm still bears traces of three. The *Lionman*'s left upper arm also bears seven – originally probably more – horizontal incisions. Between the parted legs of the Geissenklösterle figurine there is a longish, undefinable object or body part. A tail? A penis? Or a piece of cloth? Due to its badly damaged surface the significance of this part remains a mystery. The puzzlement of the German actors with respect to status and intention drew the author's attention to the fact that this is a very unusual stance, nowadays confined to the world of sports and martial arts: It figures most prominently in the traditional opening haka of New Zealand's All Blacks Rugby Team (Fig. 8). A haka is a Maori ceremonial dance. Choreographies may vary but each haka is composed of a majority of 'warlike' dynamic and often repetitive movements linking together different postures. While engaged in dancing the haka, the performers also recite a ritual text invoking the triumph of life over death¹³. Hakas are performed on special social occasions like weddings, funerals, official visits, etc. The intense emotional impact on everyone involved is remarkable.

Ethnological comparisons should certainly be employed with great caution. Is it possible at all to interpret this posture without a clue to its situational backdrop? Is it a half-relief because it would not have been feasible to carve such a small 3D-figure

13 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haka>. Accessed June 17, 2024.



Fig. 8 | Example of the Geissenklösterle figurine's posture employed today: The All Blacks perform the haka before the All Black vs South Africa test match at Westpac Stadium, Wellington, NZ. 30 July 2011 (Jo Caird/RugbyImages, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/30291646@N03/>).

engaged in such a sweeping movement or is it a half-relief because space is a signifier? With respect to the latter, several different scenarios suggest themselves:

- As a vaulting figure seen from below. The surrounding space here would be the sky.
- Viewed from above: a prostrate figure lying on the ground.
- Viewed face-to-face: A dynamic figure about to engage in action within an unknown but significant environment.

Why a Relief?

The very fact that we are looking at a half-relief draws attention to the surrounding space. The author suggests that reliefs always refer back to at least two spaces: firstly, the physical space of depicted action and, secondly, the cultural environment as a manifest space. These two interconnected spaces form a complex narrative web that can only be properly appreciated with the necessary background knowledge. What is to make of the Geissenklösterle relief? We see an expansive gesture *in space*, presumably signifying an important moment in its narrative. Other than that, we can only guess as to what kind of space it is. What do the four rows of 13 pics on the back signify? Or the indentations running around the frame? If Müller-Beck's and Holdermann's (2001b, 65) interpretation of calendrical counting is employed here within a broad context, the figurine's expansive gesture does not only conquer space but in some mysterious way time as well.

Concluding Remarks

Investigating the body language depicted in the figurative art of lost cultures cannot provide exhaustive answers as to those cultures' symbolism; yet, as a process, it may provide insight into communicational patterns. Treating the figurines as 'interesting strangers': trying to understand what they are, communicating through imitating their gestures shifts the point of view; it is a shift from distanced interpretation within one's own modern cultural terms to an appreciation of a whole spectrum of emotive information which we share as humans and which otherwise is likely to escape attention. If the initial experimental approach of 2010/11 can be developed further through more representative, multi-cultural studies, it may prove its worth as a valuable working method for obtaining more information contained in prehistoric artworks. There is no way of reconstructing 'the truth' about the figurines, but what has been gathered so far? Generally, the *Hohle Fels Lady's* posture evokes good, positive feelings of self-esteem and sensuality. The vigorously carved vaginal area stands out: Strong traces of processing suggest equally intense working gestures. The genital area is not only the seat of procreation; its sensitivity can provide a surge of intense sensations. Were those working gestures meant to be an invocation of sexual pleasure or, may be its other extreme: were they meant to be destructive? The figurine's expression combines the hint of a strong sensuality with the possibility of a fertility symbol, the two of which are by no means mutually exclusive. The histories and traditions of Western cultures have a deeply ingrained ambiguity towards the appreciation of the sexual. Even today, calling her a pin-up girl¹⁴ has some derogatory tinge to it, an instance of involuntary modern judgementalism which may have been alien to her artisan. This is why, during the experiments, the author explicitly excluded any questions concerning gender. Gender issues have always been a crucial part of cultural identity and each culture has accordingly claimed sovereignty of interpretation. We simply cannot know the Upper Palaeolithic take on them.

Connections between the *Lionman*, the Geissenklösterle half-relief (*Adorant*) and the other two *lionmen* have long been recognized (Conard 2003, 830; Conard 2014b; Hahn 1986, 191). But here again, a reconsideration of nonverbal communication via posture may lead to new clues about the importance of space which the *Lionman* and *Adorant* in particular seem about to move through. It may be the multi-layered spacial reality of shamanistic travel (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998) or the mental echo of hunter-gatherers' movements through their environment(s) made visible and tangible (Borić et al. 2013). The figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic are enigmatic works of art. Simultaneously, they are tools as well, like a scraper or a blade. They are spiritual tools to reflect on our history as humans. We have been doing that for millennia and we do it best through telling stories. Stories, though, are never completely rigid. They change with their narrators and with their audiences. How we perceive the Aurignacian anthropomorphic figurines reflects back on us. To pick up and belatedly answer the subtitle of the initial conference "*What can we learn from Palaeolithic art?*", the answer may be: The Upper Palaeolithic figurines are great storytellers; as we try to decipher *their* story, they teach us *ours*.

14 See the title of the 2011/12 URMU exhibition: *Urmutter contra Pin-Up-Girl*.

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