



Research Report

The Santimamiñe Cave near Bilbao (Spain): a central point in Basque mythology and origins and its pre-Iberian inscriptions

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(Received 18 April 2026; Accepted 6 May 2026; Published 22 May 2026)

Abstract - Cantabrian caves in northern Spain have been inhabited for at least 40,000 years (Gravettian period), as evidenced by characteristic rock paintings and U-series dating. El Castillo cave is among the earliest recorded inhabited sites in northern Spain and southern France. In contrast, human activity in Santimamiñe cave has been dated to approximately 14,000 years ago (Magdalenian period), based on antler industry remains. This paper presents incised rock signs from Santimamiñe cave and relate them with identical motifs, either painted or incised, which have been identified in the Sahara (southern Algeria), the Canary Islands, and across Iberia in both megalithic and non-megalithic contexts, including isolated polished stones. Comparable elements also appear in the Iberian-Tartessian signary, often interpreted as an evolution of earlier Paleolithic rock markings. The Iberian-Tartessian language has long been considered related, or possibly identical, to Basque (Basque-Iberian hypothesis). Accordingly, these Paleolithic symbols have been linked to Iberian and Basque linguistic traditions (Basque-iberism). Their proposed function is religious or funerary, within a Mother Goddess belief system spanning the Paleolithic and Neolithic. Furthermore, the discovery of early Homo sapiens remains in northwest Africa (Jebel Irhoud, Morocco), alongside evidence of Paleolithic gene flow between Africa and Iberia, the lack of eastern demic diffusion in Iberia/Morocco supports the plausibility of human dispersal into Iberia via the Strait of Gibraltar. The presence of similar signs in Altamira suggests that Santimamiñe may be as ancient as other Cantabrian cave sites. Future dating of its wall art may confirm Upper Paleolithic occupation. An incised roe deer figure has also newly identified in the cave.

Keywords : Santimamiñe, Altamira, Canary Is, Lineal Megalithic Signs, Gravettian, Magdalenian , Sahara, Homo sapiens, Canary Is, Africa, Paleolithic, Iberian, Tartessian, Demic Diffusion, Jebel Irhoud

Introduction

Legend

The Santimamiñe Cave, located in Kortezubi (Bizkaia, Basque Country, Spain), is one of the most important archaeological sites in the region

(<https://bizkaikoa.bizkaia.eus/detalleContenido.asp?id=69&t=1>) (Eraso 2011). This site is not only valuable for its cave paintings and archaeological remains, but also for the rich corpus of mythology and legends that surrounds it (Eraso 2011). Basque mythology is one of the oldest and richest in Europe, with roots that go deep into prehistory. Their myths are full of supernatural beings, deities and nature spirits. The Santimamiñe cave, due to its antiquity and its cultural importance, has naturally been involved in this mythological tradition.

The Lamias are one of these mythical beings associated with the Santimamiñe cave. They are water nymphs, often described as beautiful women who live in the rivers and fountains of the region. In Basque mythology, the Lamias are known for their ability to weave and spin, as well as their propensity to help humans who treat them with respect. In the local legends of Santimamiñe, the Lamias are said to gather in the streams near the cave and can sometimes be seen dancing on full moon nights. These nymphs are also believed to have the ability to cure illnesses and grant good fortune to those who encounter them and treat them with reverence.

https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitolog%C3%ADa_vasca

Another important figure in the mythology associated with Santimamiñe is the Gentiles. These are described as prehistoric giants that inhabited the Basque Country before the arrival of humans (<https://aunamendi.eusko-ikaskuntza.eus/en/gentiles/ar-62712/>). According to legends, the Gentiles were beings of great size and strength, but also of great kindness. They are said to have built many of the region's megalithic monuments, and their existence is intertwined with ancient and magical times. In the Santimamiñe cave, it is believed that the Gentiles had one of their refuges. Local legends say that these giants used the cave as a sacred meeting place. It is often said that the vibrations of their presence can still be felt in the depths of the cave, especially during stormy nights when their spirits are said to return to protect their former home (Figs 1 - 4).

Prehistory

Discovered in 1916, the cave has been the subject of numerous archaeological investigations

(<http://www.arterupestrecantabrico.es/cuevas/cueva-de-santimamine.html>). The first studies were carried out by Abbé Henri Breuil, Telesforo de Aranzadi, José Miguel de Barandiarán and Enrique Eguren between 1917 and 1918

(https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cueva_de_Santimami%C3%B1e). These studies revealed a rich collection of rock art and material remains that provide valuable information about the prehistoric societies that inhabited the area. region. The walls of the cave are adorned with 47 cave paintings depicting animals such as bison, horses, deer and goats (<http://www.arterupestrecantabrico.es/cuevas/cueva-de-santimamine.html>). These paintings, made in black using charcoal, stand out for their detailed representation and artistic style, characteristic of the Magdalenian (Erostarbe-Tome 2023). Excavations at the entrance to the cave have unearthed stone tools, faunal remains and shell holes that indicate a diet rich in shellfish. These findings suggest that the cave was used not only as a shelter, but also as a place for daily activities and rituals. (Figs 1 - 4).

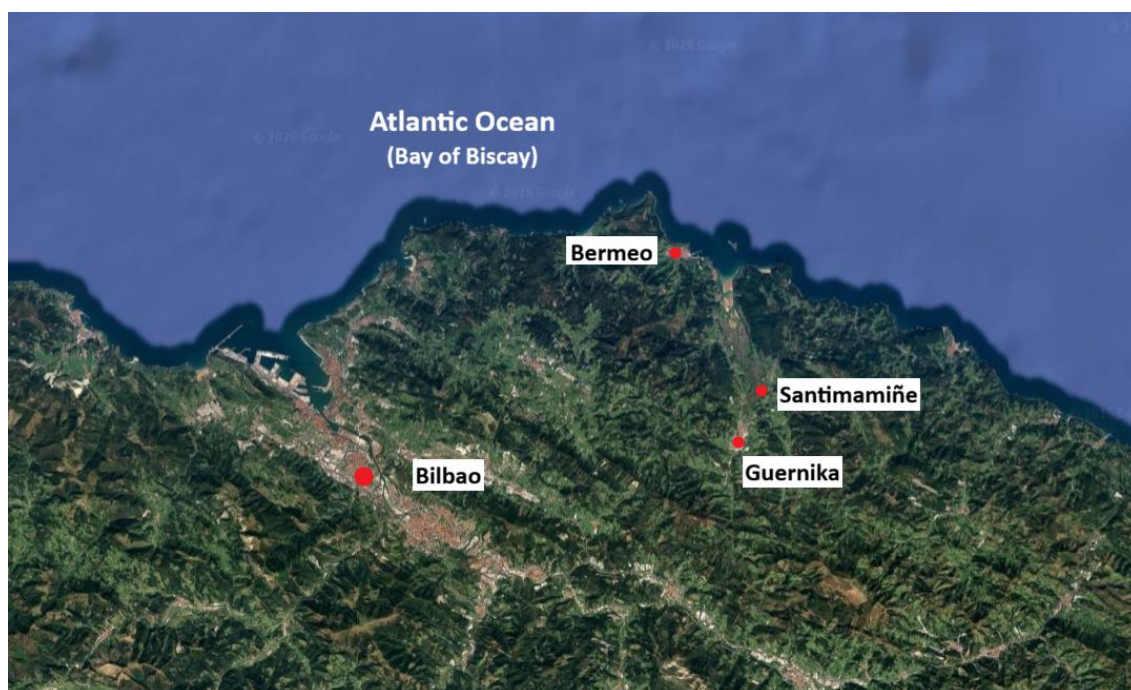


Fig. 1 Geographical placing of Santimamiñe cave in the Cantabrian Mountains Range (N. 43° 20' 47" y E. 1° 03' 5"). Its place is close to Bilbao and closer to Gernika.



Fig. 2 Mt Ereñazar where the Santimamiñe Cave is placed. A view from the Gernika River Mouth.



Fig. 3 Santimamiñe cave entrance (N. 43° 20' 47" y E. 1° 03' 5").



Fig. 4. Santimamiñe wall Paleolithic paintings.

In addition, some other ancient incised rock lineal scripts are named Lineal Megalithic Writings or signs and have been found in Santimamiñe and also in Altamira Cave ([Arnaiz-Villena et al. 2025](#)) Whether these signs represent one single or several languages, symbolic or utilitarian material (i.e.: measuring space/time/sky schemes) is not known. They have also been found in Iberia in a Megalithic context (thus its name): more or less unclassifiable lines and signs are found in Southern Spain like in Huelva and Cadiz dolmens ([Vazquez-Hoys 2008](#); [Arnaiz-Villena et al. 2013](#)) respectively, and Antequera Dolmens ([Muñoz-Gambero 2019](#)). Linear rocks incise lines and signs are also found in Northern Spain Pontevedra Stone, Galicia, Spain ([Muñoz-Gambero 2019](#)); some of them are mixed with typical Iberian semi-syllabary scripts, as the typical vocal “i” ([Arnaiz-Villena, personal observation](#)), ([Muñoz-Gambero 2019](#); [Arnaiz-Villena, Piedra de Pontevedra, Museo Galego, personal observation](#)).

In summary, together with the so called Lineal Megalithic Scripts ([Vazquez-Hoys 2008](#); [Muñoz-Gambero 2019](#)) found in North and South Iberia, Iberian semi-syllabary signs are found. A *continuum* timeline of lineal painted and incised lines is found from lineal more ancient or Megalithic more recent alphabetic-like signs like Sitovo and Gradeshnitsa in Bulgaria ([Figs 5 - 7](#)), which are dated older than 3,500 years BC, Iberian

and syllabaries/alphabets evolution timeline may go back till about 70,000 years (in South Africa, Paleolithic) to 1st millennium BC and later.

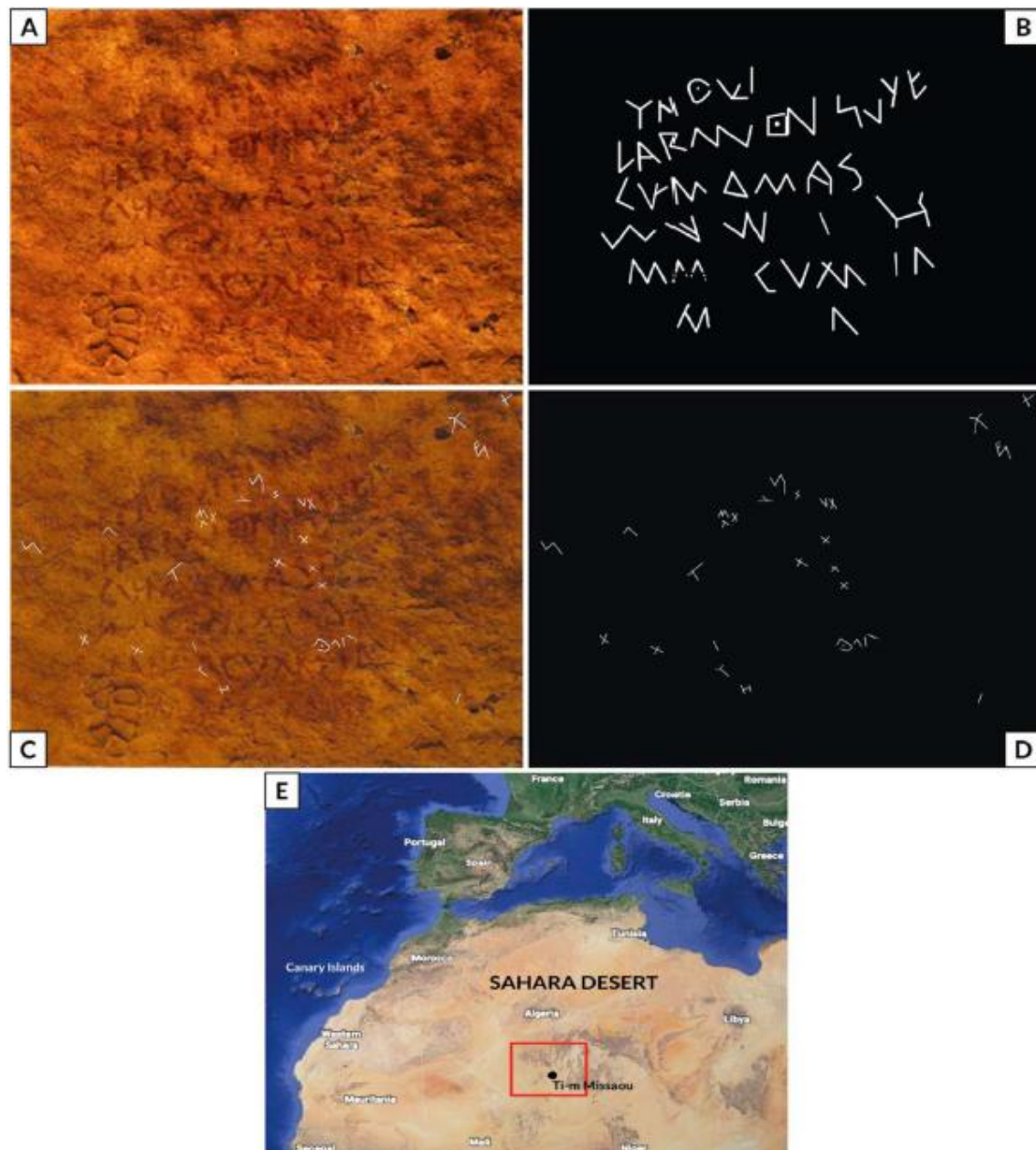
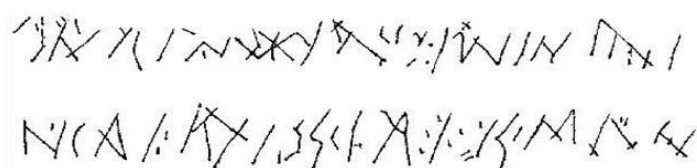


Fig. 5. A Photograph taken at Ti-m Missaou shelter (Sahara Desert, South-West Algeria). Painted phrases were thought to be “Latin” by Pichler, these are the bigger case letters painted in ochre colour (2003) but a transcription and translation were proposed by us (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2021) based on the Iberian-Tartessian semi-syllabary (Appendix I). B- Black and white Iberian-Tartessian scripted signs highlighted from Figure A (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2021). C- Photograph of smaller and incised lineal scripts highlighted in white and mixed with the painted in ochre colour ones shown in Figs. 5 A, B (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2021, 2022c). Also, identified in Iberian-Tartessian signary (Appendix I of Ref Arnaiz-villena *et al.* 2025). They are interpreted as Lineal Megalithic Scripts, precursors of Iberian Tartessian signary, D- Scripted signs of Fig. 5 D highlighted in black and white. E- Ti-m Missou shelter, red square (Hoggar Area, Sahara Desert, Algeria) placement. The biggest city of this place in Tamanrasset (Algeria).

A Sahara Desert shelter contains both Lineal Megalithic scripts and Iberian-Tartessian signary (Tim Misaw, Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2021, Fig. 5) and the Lineal Megalithic Signs are always the same with little variations and have been found by us in the places shown in Fig. 3 (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2024) that includes megalithic and non-megalithic contexts (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2019a; 2019b; 2020; 2022c; 2024; see Fig. 8).

At some stages, incised lines without apparent syllable or letter representations are mixed together with classical recognizable syllables/letters (Fig. 8), like naviform lines that go together in rocks with Iberian semi-syllabary both in Iberian and Canary Islands rocks (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2015; Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2019a; 2019b; 2020; 2022c; 2024). It is likely that Iberian semi-syllabary existed long before than 1st millennium BC, because its antiquity has mainly been adapted by scholars to appear later than Phoenician alphabet and Phoenicians postulated arrival to Iberia and thus an urgent revision is required. Strabo wrote that Southwest Iberians had writing since 6,000 years BC (Strabo 1998).

SITOVO INSCRIPTION (SITOVO, BULGARIA)



GRADESHNITSA TABLETS (GRADESHNITSA, BULGARIA)

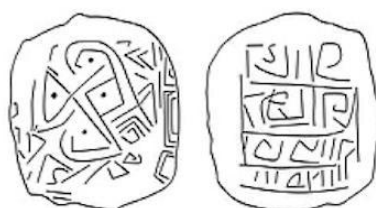


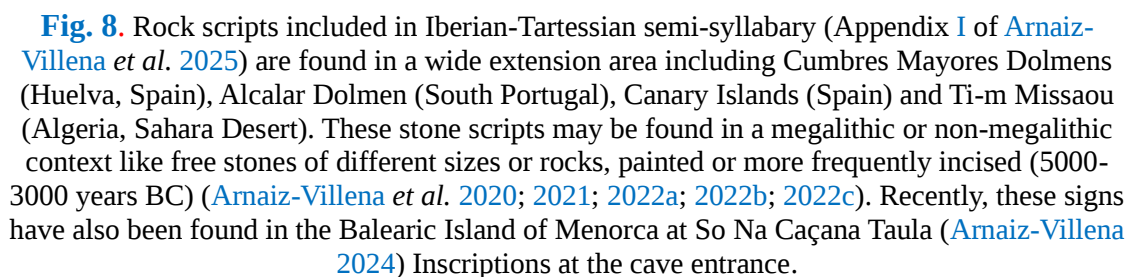
Fig. 6 Sitovo (abobe) and Gradeshnitsa (below) ancient inscriptions found in Bulgaria dated older than 3,500 years BC. **Fig. 7** SITOVO INSCRIPTION:

http://www.korenine.si/zborniki/zbornik06/serafimov_sitovo06.pdf;

<https://www2.uned.es/geo-1-historia-antigua>

universal/ESCRITURAS_ANTIGUA/Escrituras_3_antiguas_BALKAN_DANUBE-SCRIPT.htm

GRADESHNITSA TABLETS: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gradeshnitsa_tablets_)



A Sony Camera Cybershot 14.1 Megapixels Carl-Zeiss lens Vario-Tessar and Sony Xperia G3112 cellular phone camera were used for photograph work. Magnification of photographs and computational analyses of rocks have been performed with Adobe Illustrator 2020 and Mac OS images visualizer. All photographs were taken by Antonio Arnaiz-Villena (AAV), and they may be used under complete citation of paper and permission, as law permits. Some of the incised rock engravings will be studied in present work. A more exhaustive study is ongoing.

Methodology used for proposing a translation hypothesis for “Latin” or Iberian-Guanche Inscriptions (Arnaiz-Villena 2000)

We have followed a methodology which is similar to that proposed by Greenberg and Ruhlen (Ruhlen 1994) based on phonology and semantics. Our premises for approaching these Usko-Mediterranean languages are:

- 1) Languages may correctly be classified, and decipherment approached with 10-20 "diagnostic" cognates (i.e., the personal pronouns and other frequently used cognates like plant names, family generics and tools and common life terms existing in Neolithic and pre-Neolithic societies). We use phonology and semantics similarities.
- 2) Most of the written ancient Mediterranean languages studied previously by us (i.e., Iberian-Tartessian, Etruscan, Linear A and others) refer to an apparently common religion (Poulianos 1969; Arnaiz-Villena & Alonso-García 1998; 2001; Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2001, 2022). This decipherment has been possible to the Basque-Spanish translation of words found in the above-mentioned extinct languages and showing a Basque correspondence. The topics found in this religion are: the Mother (Ama= mother, in Basque (B.)), the way of the Zen (dead, in B.) towards another life, going through The Door or Atan (B.). The flames (Kar, B.), which make the dead to be afraid, etc. A detailed transcription and translation hypotheses are found in (Arnaiz-Villena 2000, download chapter; Arnaiz-Villena & Alonso García 2001; Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2001).
- 3) Most of these deciphered "Usko-Mediterranean" languages refer to the following matters: A. Religion and after death (90%) (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2022). B. Accountancy related to food-storage and other topics. This skewed thematic writing may be due to the fact that writings have been better preserved in sanctuaries and/or palaces, and not in normal living people housing (the latter being constructed with more perishable materials). Also, Neolithic and pre-Neolithic societies may have used written words as a magic or totemic sense related to permanent keeping of possessions and also to securing a proper and pleasant after death life; casts of clerks (related or not to religion) could have further driven this tendency in order to keep up with privileges. In addition, it is

obvious that primitive societies felt less secure than nowadays more complex ones; this could have led people to find religion and food register to be essential.

4) There are groups of words that are found together in the different languages (Arnaiz- Villena 2000), i.e.: Atinas (B.), the door of darkness. Other idiomatic expressions preserved in both ancient Iberian and Basque are shown in chapter 7, section 2.6 of the same reference.

5) Beginning and ending of words are problematic and unless meaning is known, it is very difficult to define them. Only known and repeated meanings (in several languages) are taken as sound cognate identification.

6) Common and proper names are almost impossible to distinguish. Many proper names come from a common name like in English "Rose" and also in Mediterranean languages like Basque (for males, Bilebai= Circumcision; Gurutz= Cross; Eztegu= Wedding; Lor= Flower; Aintza= Glory; Sein= Innocent; Lihoa= Linen; Ama=Mother; Edurne= Snow; Gentza= Peace; Deunoro= All Saints; Bakarr= Loneliness) and Spanish (for females: Azucena= White Lily; Gloria= Glory; Cruz= Cross; Flor= Flower; Inocencio= Innocent; Lino= Linon; Nieves= Snows; Paz= Peace; Santos= Saints; Soledad= Loneliness. Ancient societies tended to name people with common names (Great Bear, Eagle, Sitting Bull), as it is well known with North American Indians.

7) Basque language has remained with little modifications throughout time, because invasions have not modified this and other Basque society characteristics (Collins 1989).

8) Basque language was much more widespread than its present-day limits (Venemann 2003; Intxausti 1992).

Transliteration and translation hypothesis of Usko-Mediterranean languages including Iberian

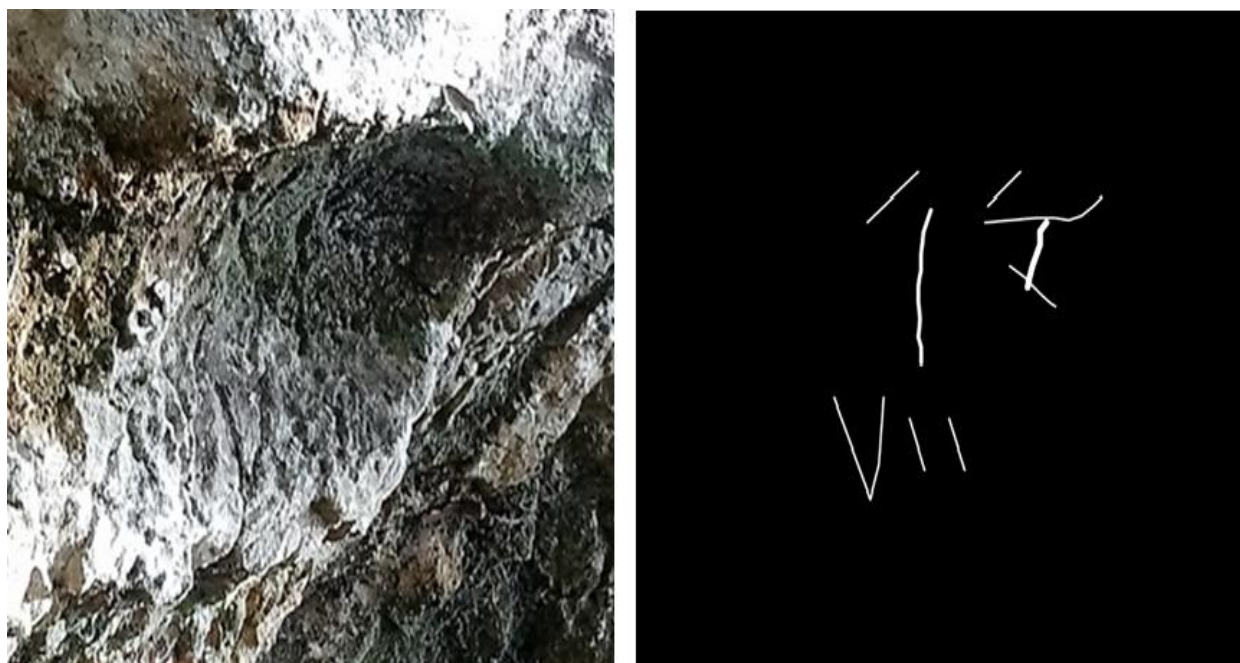
Iberian-Tartesian, Etruscan and Minoan Linear A have been transliterated and a translation proposed, as referred in (Poulianos 1969; Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 1999; Arnaiz-Villena 2000). All bibliography recollection for transliteration was achieved from libraries of University Complutense of Madrid (Philosophy and Geography Faculties, and CSIC). Thirty-six books were used at the same time by a group of residents directed by Prof. Arnaiz-Villena at Doce de Octubre Hospital, Madrid. Basque-Spanish cognate

meanings have provided the basis for the translation. Berber has been distinguished from the Arab contamination by comparison with Basque (Sota *et al.* 1976; Keretxeta 1990), Iberian-Tartesian (see Chapter 7, of Arnaiz-Villena 2000) and Arab (Corriente-Cordoba 1977). The ancient Lybic scripts were studied from (Chabot 1940a; 1940b; 1941; Harden 1971); some of them were written in Punic characters. Directions of the scripts were generally vertical and only assessed by the sense of meaning (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 1999). Etruscan texts were taken from D'Aneusa (1997). Hittite, Sumerian, Eblaic, Elamite, Ugaritic, Egyptian and Guanche texts were taken from the transliterated references of the most recognized World specialists (see references list of Arnaiz-Villena 2000, chapter 9 pages 210, 245, 246, which may be download from <http://chopo.pntic.mec.es/~biolmol/publicaciones/Usko.pdf> (See Arnaiz-Villena & Alonso-García 2001).

Results (Figs 9 - 11)



Fig 9. A new incised roe deer head in Santimamiñe cave. It is firstly described by us and is placed in the left-hand side of the cave entrance.



	= M = (A)M(A)		= BA
The Mother		Yes (emphasis)	

Fig. 10. Iberian or pre-Iberian inscriptions (Lineal Megalithic Scripts) found at the entrance of Santimamiñe Cave, Basque Country, Spain (left hand side). Photograph (above), signs transcription (middle) and proposed translation (below). An interpretation of scripts transcription and translation of some signs found in this rock is put forward as follows (see Appendix I of [Arnaiz-Villena et al, 2025](#) and also [Gomez-Moreno 1949; 1962](#)). BA, could also be interpreted as (A)PA or priest or shaman

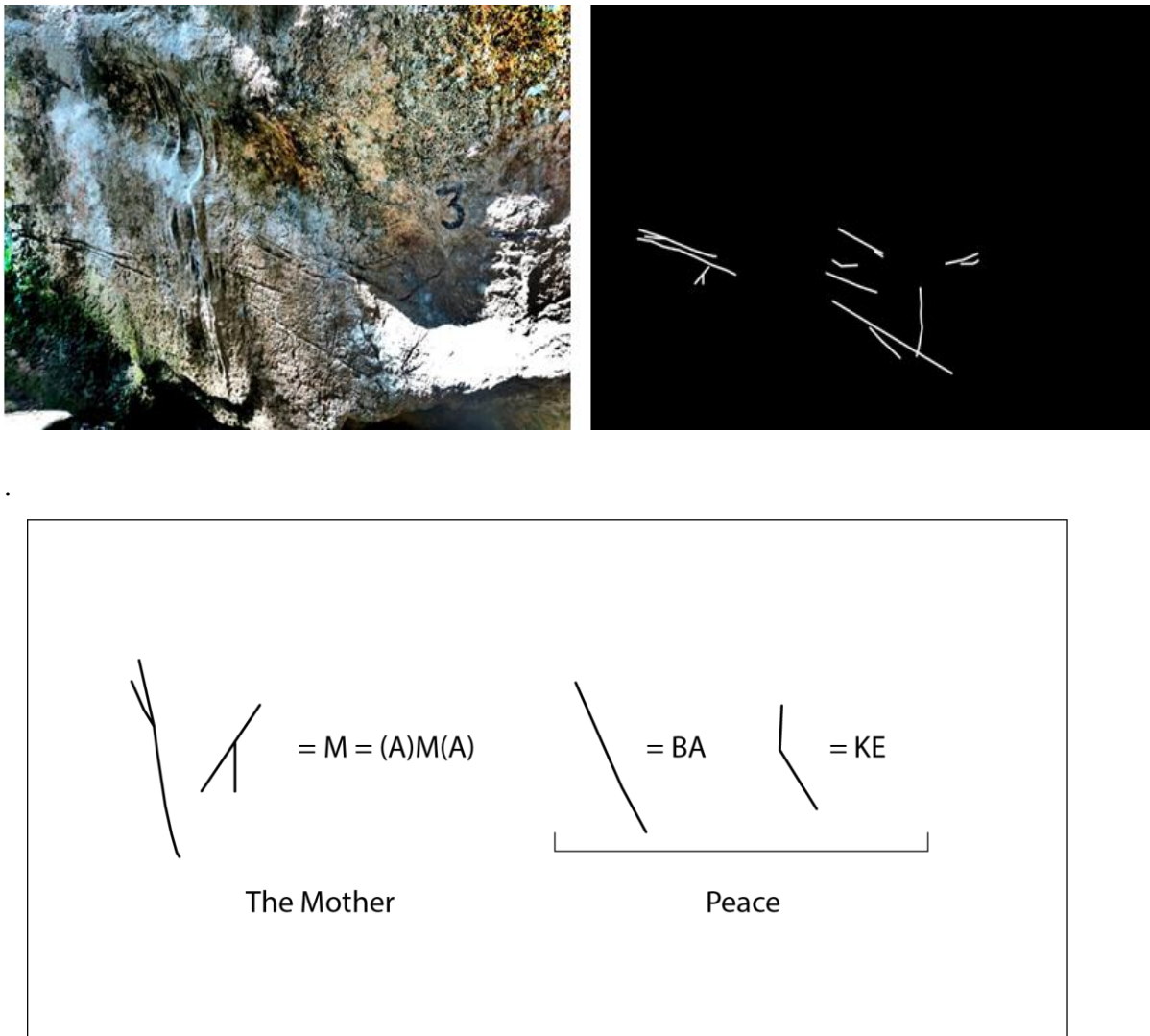


Fig. 11. (See Fig 10) Iberian or pre-Iberian inscriptions (Lineal Megalithic Scripts) found at the entrance of Santimamiñe Cave, Basque Country, Spain. An interpretation of scripts transcription and translation of some signs found in this rock is put forward as shown (see Appendix I in [Arnaiz-Villena et al. 2025](#) and also [Gomez-Moreno 1949; 1962](#))

Discussion

Shared Iberian-Tartessian signs in other megalithic contexts and possible evolution from Lineal Megalithic Scripts

This megalithic culture goes together with Lineal Megalithic Scripts which are sometimes admixed with Iberian-Tartessian scripts (Appendix I of [Arnaiz-Villena et al. 2025](#)). [Leisner & Leisner 1943](#); [Cerdán et al. 1952; 1975](#); [Sousa et al. 2020](#); [Arnaiz-Villena et al. 2022a; 2022b](#)) (Fig. 8).

Our proposed religious and funerary meaning for these simple inscriptions suggests that Mother Goddess Religion remained from Paleolithic to Neolithic (Megalithic) times and that both religion and scripts have evolved conjointly. Iberian-Tartessian initial scripts may have appeared (Fig. 8) in the middle of Megalithic Lineal rock scripts like at Cumbres Mayores Dolmen, San Bartolomé Dolmen (See Appendix I in Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2025) (Leisner & Leisner 1943; Cerdán *et al.* 1952; 1975; Sousa *et al.* 2020; Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2022a; 2022b; 2022c) and Alcalar Dolmen (the Alcalar Stoneslab). On the other hand, an older Lineal Paleolithic Script has been recorded and solidly dated in South Africa by Henshilwood group at Howiesons Poort (Henshilwood & Dubreuil 2011; Wadley 2015; Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2021b). Dates are back to 100000 to 60000 years old. Mother Goddess Religion manifestations are worldwide shown on the 5 continents and may be a strong cohesion force that joined other cultural traits like our studied Paleolithic/Neolithic Lineal writings, and Iberian-Tartessian and other ancient languages writings (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2021b) (Fig. 12). A wide review on Mother Goddess Religion can be obtained in Gimbutas (1991), Graham (1996), Campbell (2013), Piquero (2017) and Lacalle-Rodríguez (2019) (Fig. 13).

Altamira Paleolithic Scripts in Time Frame and Homo sapiens out of Africa

Some black and red lineal marks could have been made at Gravettian Epoch about 30,000 years BC (García-Díez *et al.* 2013, 2024; Shao *et al.* 2025). This is concordant with this type of signs also found in South African Caves at Howiesons Poort (Henshilwood & Dubreuil 2011; Wadley 2015; Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2021b) which are dated about 100000 years BC. This suggests that these early lineal signs of cave rock scripts had an intentional writing meaning which may have evolved to lineal alphabets like those shown in Fig. 12. In the absence of a political, administrative or other kind of relatedness in the wide area where these lineal megalithic or stone scripts were found, if they have a religious main topic the Mother Goddess religion (Fig. 13) could have been the common link. It was occurring during both Paleolithic and Neolithic epochs.

Wall paintings and human antler work dating of Santimamiñe (Basque Country), Altamira and El Castillo (Santander) North Spain Caves dating

Santimamiñe is about 95 km far from Altamira and 80 km far from El Castillo Caves (straight line) and close to the same mountainous system and the sea coast. Wall Paintings

in these two later caves have been dated about more 40. thousand years before present in El Castillo (Pike *et al.* 2012) and 30 thousand years in Altamira at Gravettian lower Paleolithic (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 2025). However, human activity has been dated for Santimamiñe only 14 thousand years BP at Magdalenian period by using human antler industry dating (Erostarbe-Tome 2023). However, human Santimamiñe wall painting has not dated and it is reasonable that being equal figures art to El Castillo (and other Upper Paleolithic Cantabrian close by caves (Pink *et al.* 2012) and Altamira caves and close to them human activity in Santimamiñe is at least as old as in surrounding area human cave activity, i.e.: Upper Paleolithic age also. In addition, an incised

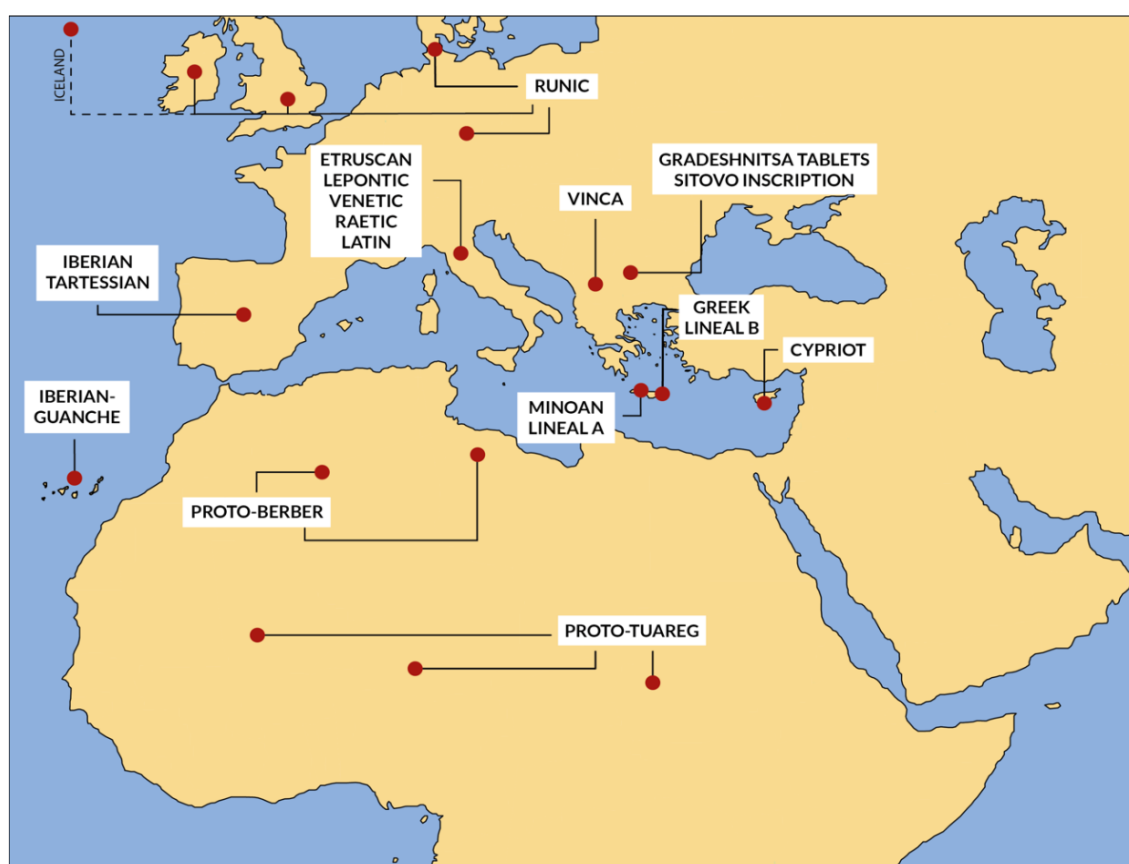


Fig. 12 Spread of lineal writing with probably Megalithic/Paleolithic origins of transmission of different ancient languages writing and green ancient Sahara origin.

On the other hand, most ancient Homo sapiens remains are now recorded at North West Morocco (300000 years BC) at Jebel Irhud (Hublin *et al.* 2017) close to Gibraltar Strait and Iberia. This together with the fact that demic diffusion from ancient Palestine Area Iberia does not exist: physical anthropology, genetics and linguistics showed this assertion (Arnaiz-Villena *et al.* 1999), i.e., no dental and other physical anthropology,

genetic and linguistics differences have been found in Iberia and North Africa during the Mesolithic –Neolithic transition. This would have occurred if farmers from the East Mediterranean would have replaced Iberia and North Africa populations which both of them show analogies in these anthropology traits. Thus, the Cavalli-Sforza pushed demic diffusion does not exist for Iberia.

Also, Sahara Desert has become the biggest desert extension on Earth in the last 10000 years, particularly after the 5000 years BC epoch. Sahara was green and full of rivers and lakes and heavily populated who migrated mostly to the sea, the North, towards the Mediterranean coast. This phenomenon is cyclic and involves Earth axis chances about each 20000 years (Equinox precession) ([Armstrong et al. 2017](#)).

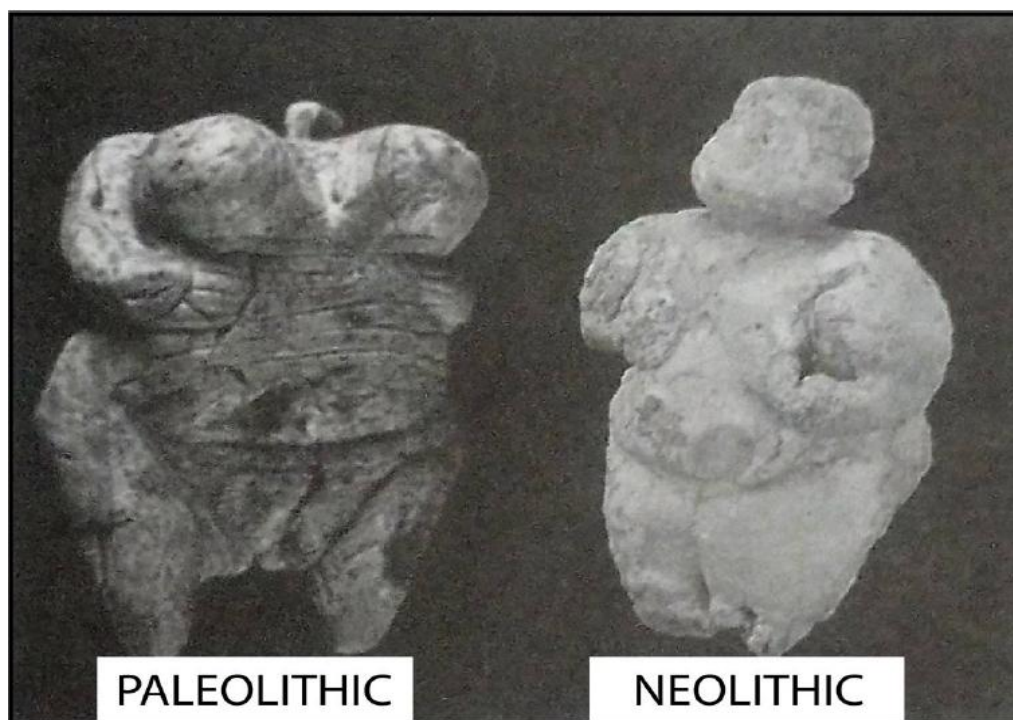


Fig.13 At left, *Paleolithic figurine* from Hohle Fels, Germany, 40,000 years BP. At right, *Neolithic figurine* from Catal Hüyük, Turkey, 8,000 years BP. These Paleolithic and Neolithic figurines are found in the context of Mother Goddess religion which was extended throughout Europe, Atlantic and Mediterranean areas, and Africa. These figurines are found in the Mediterranean Area, Europe, Canary Islands and Africa. Their extension goes in parallel with the Lineal Megalithic and Paleolithic scripts that may have given rise to the Iberian-Tartessian scripts (Appendix I). Mother Goddess Religion and religious lineal rock writings may be different faces of the same culture. Figures taken from [Piquero \(2017\)](#)

Thus, we conclude that Saharan migrations to North, Mediterranean Sea and Iberia and other Mediterranean areas, when still ice or cold conditions was covering many parts of Europe may have driven to Saharan migrants to colonize also caves, like Altamira

Cave. Indeed, the same type of Paleolithic lineal signs are found in South Algerian Sahara and Altamira Cave (Figs. 5 and 8). This North Africa migration had probably a bearing on the classic Mediterranean and European lineal writings as shown in Fig. 12. A scheme of these migration is shown in Fig. 14.

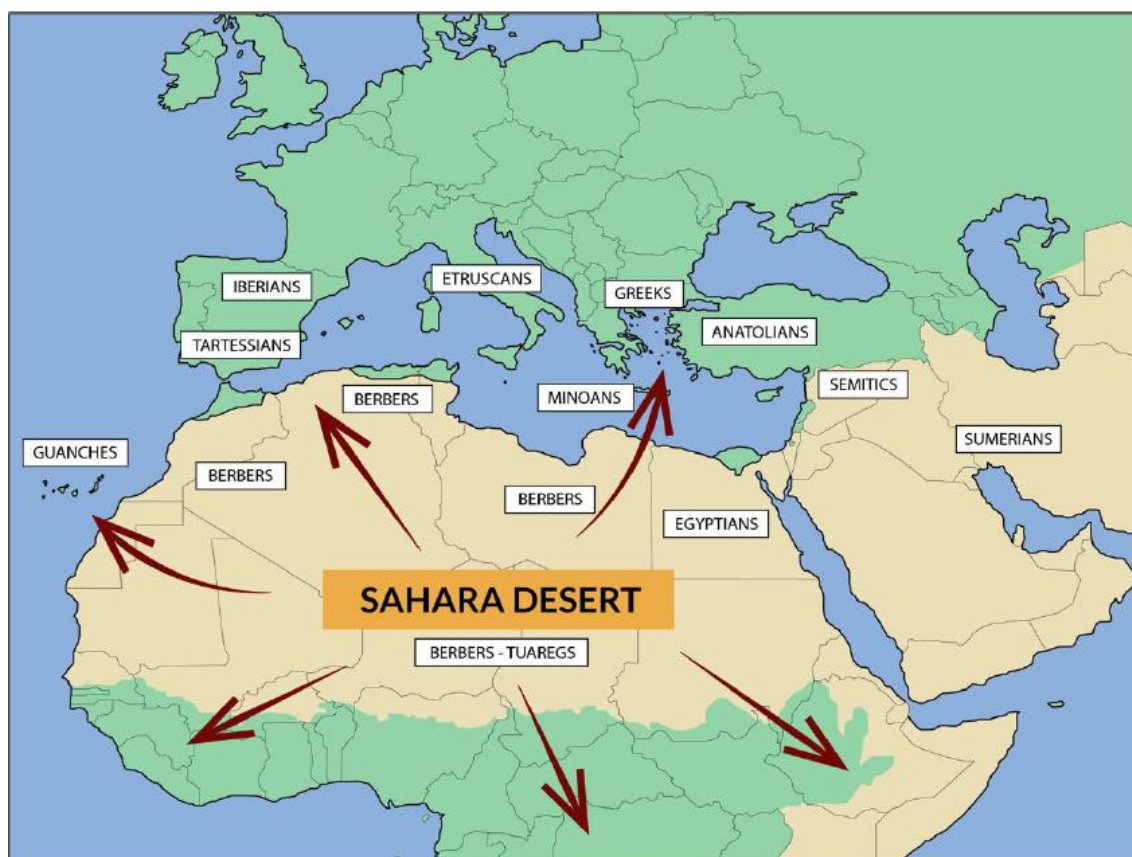


Fig. 14 Map depicting various ancient languages Lineal writing of a possible African climate exiled Saharan people, when it was changing from a “green” fertile and heavily populated area to desertification. However, Megalithic and Paleolithic Lineal culture traces are wider in World (see text). It is shown Mediterranean area with classic populations (squares). Arrows represent population movements when the most recent Sahara desertification episodes ([Armstrong et al, 2023](#)) occurred after 10,000 years BC. (See also [Arnaiz-Villena 2000](#); [Arnaiz-Villena et al. 1999](#); [2001](#))

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

Acknowledgments: We want to thank University Complutense of Madrid for its continuous support of our work and its grant PR3/23-30834.

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