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► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Yves Bigot, Laurent Bruxelles, Jean-Louis Galera, Michel Wienin. The absence of signatures from the XVIIIth century in two caves of the south border of the Massif Central (France). The cases of Faux-monnayeurs Cave (Millau, Aveyron) and Protestants Cave (Saint-Hippolyte-du-Fort, Gard). *Karstologia Mémoires*, 2022, 18th International Congress of Speleology - Savoie Mont Blanc 2022 - SYMPOSIUM 04 - Geomorphology and Speleogenesis, 4 (24), pp.281-284. hal-03916391

HAL Id: hal-03916391

<https://hal.science/hal-03916391v1>

Submitted on 30 Dec 2022

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Explorations & History

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The absence of signatures from the XVIIIth century in two caves of the south border of the Massif Central (France) The cases of Faux-monnayeurs Cave (Millau, Aveyron) and Protestants Cave (Saint-Hippolyte-du-Fort, Gard)

Jean-Yves BIGOT⁽¹⁾, Laurent BRUXELLES⁽²⁾, Jean-Louis GALERA⁽³⁾ & Michel WIENIN⁽⁴⁾

(1) Association française de karstologie (AFK), Montpellier, jeanbigot536@gmail.com (corresponding author)

(2) Laboratoire TRACES - UMR 5608, Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès, laurent.bruxelles@inrap.fr

(3) Société Cévenole de Spéléologie et de Préhistoire (SCSP), Alès, caminarem@free.fr

(4) Société Cévenole de Spéléologie et de Préhistoire (SCSP), Alès, wienin.michel@orange.fr

Abstract

The visit of two caves, located in the Causses and the Cévennes (France), has shown an absence of graffiti and signatures of the 18th century in both caves. Indeed, later signatures from the 19th century attest to a resumption of frequentation after a hiatus of more than one hundred years. This hiatus extends from 1650 to 1925, for the Faux-monnayeurs Cave (Aveyron), and from 1687 to 1887, for the Protestants Cave (Gard). This is an enigmatic gap in frequented caves, in addition quite remote. However, they may share a common history. Before interpreting the absence of 18th century signatures in both caves, we must first recall the tradition of signatures on the cave walls. Finally, the respective histories of both regions, in which these caves open, make it possible to propose a hypothesis in connection with marking events of the history of France. The absence of signatures from the 18th century coincides with the French Wars of Religion and could explain by the flight of the Huguenots out of the Kingdom of France.

Résumé

Absence de signatures du 18^e siècle dans deux grottes du sud du Massif central (France) : les grottes des Faux-monnayeurs (Aveyron) et des Protestants (Saint-Hippolyte-du-Fort, Gard). La visite de ces deux grottes des Causses et des Cévennes a révélé une absence de toute signature et graffiti du 18^e siècle, alors que les signatures réapparaissent à la fin du 19^e siècle après une longue interruption de 1650 à 1925 aux Faux-monnayeurs et de 1687 à 1887 aux protestants. Comment expliquer ce hiatus dans ces deux cavités éloignées l'une de l'autre ? Une hypothèse est proposée dans cet article : cette longue période sans signature fait suite aux guerres de religion dans ces régions et à l'exil des Huguenots hors du royaume de France.

1. Introduction



Figure 1: Situation map of the two caves in France.

A visit to the Faux-monnayeurs Cave (Millau, Aveyron, Fig. 1) revealed the presence of signatures attesting ancient standing frequentation.

However, the absence of signatures between 1650 and 1925 remained unexplained. Various hypotheses have been formulated, some linked to the natural closure of the cave, others to historical facts or climatic disasters. However, there was nothing to allow the investigation to go any further until the visit of another cave with old signatures presenting the same gap as that of the Faux-monnayeurs.

In the Protestants Cave (Saint-Hippolyte-du-Fort, Gard), another gap, between 1687 and 1887 can be noticed. The signatures of the 19th century attest to a resumption of human frequentation after two centuries of absence.

An investigation was to be conducted to try to explain this hiatus of several centuries in relatively distant caves, but which perhaps share a common history.

After having exposed the characteristics of each cavity, we will propose a hypothesis to the absence of signatures in the 18th century in these two caves of the Cévennes and the Grands Causses.

2. The tradition of signatures

The underground sites have been decorated, erased and overwriting, for long periods without regulation having been imposed on the authors. Today, graffiti left by cave visitors is no longer accepted (BIGOT, 2011). However, the tradition of signatures, often accompanied a date, is a form of appropriation of the cave, the message of which translates as: « I was there, this day ».

Whatever our opinions, the tradition of signatures and graffiti in caves is a chance, because it provides information on the dates of the incursions and the ancient frequentation of the caves.

The signatures of the Faux-monneyeurs Cave (Aveyron) and Protestants Cave (Gard) may provide new information on the history of underground exploration.

3. The Faux-monneyeurs Cave in Millau

a) Another story of the cave

The Faux-monneyeurs Cave (Fig. 2) is located under the Pouncho d'Agast, in a ledge of the Causse Noir. The narrow entrance overlooks the Dourbie valley. The cave is defended by a severe and narrow chicane which filters visitors.

Admittedly, the cave is known for its history written by Louis BALSAN. In 1931, he wrote: « bronze or copper plates cut out, (...) coins imitated from those of the country of Dombes or Comtat Venaissin ».

It seems that this cave served as a workshop for counterfeiters between 1655 and 1657.

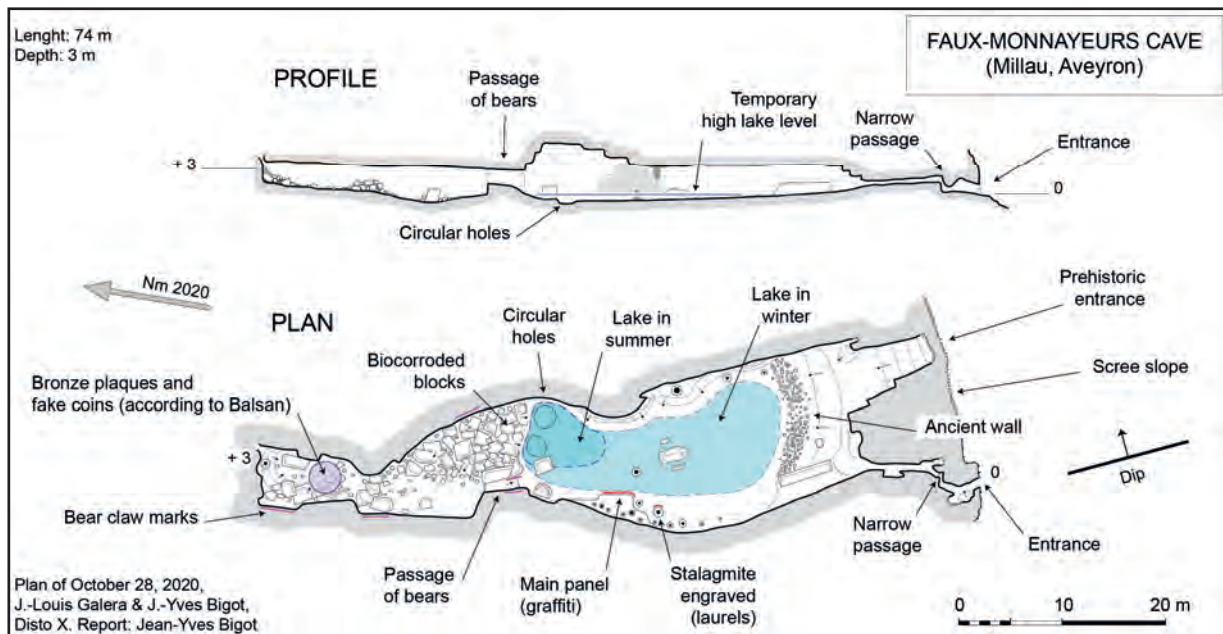


Figure 2: Survey of the Faux-monneyeurs Cave.

When he saw the panel of old signatures, BALSAN associated the names of the signatories with those of the counterfeiters. The aforementioned characters have been able to allow themselves this imprudence because their hiding place, behind a corridor easy to conceal and of painful access (it is necessary to crawl on more ten meters), should be inviolable » (BALSAN, 1931). However, one can very well write another story, completely different, on the basis of the traces recognized in the cave.

b) Graffiti and signatures

There are many graffiti on a large panel corresponding to a corroded stalagmite massif. Some graffiti are old and date from the 17th century. We note the name of Jacques Brunet who signed in 1635 twice, both on a stalagmite and on the large panel. This large, light-colored panel is heavily weathered and is an ideal support for engraving. It is an ancient biocorroded stalagmite exposing the calcite laminations. The biocorrosion is attributed to the bats which have occupied the cave for a very long time. As the cave is still frequented, visitors continued to affix their names to the lower part of the panel, quite difficult to read. Only the upper part, inaccessible to most visitors, is well preserved. We note the engraved names of P. Vaquier without date, of

G. Cure in 1640 and F. Lagrifoul in 1618. The quality of the writing and the decoration, inspired by bookplates or coats of arms, indicates that signatories are lettered (Fig. 3). Manifestly, the cave was very well known and frequented in the first half of the 17th century.

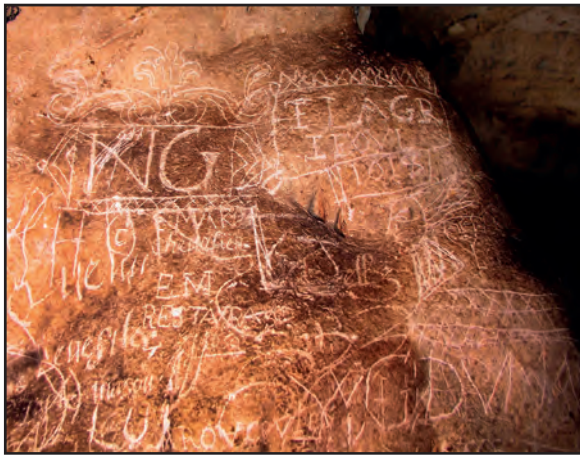


Figure 3: Upper part of the main panel preserved from posterior overloads and vandalism. At the top left, the initials NG seem to be surmounted by a crown of arms indicating the noble quality of a person who remains to be identified. Top right, « F. Lagrifoul 1618 ».

In 1931, Louis BALSAN discovered a counterfeiters' workshop and associated the names found in the cave with the counterfeit money activity. Nothing is less certain, because BALSAN himself recognizes that « no name, however, corresponds to the ten convicted of the trials of February 1664 » (BALSAN, 1931).

Indeed, the history of frequentation of caves, in particular through the works of Trevor R. SHAW « History of cave science, the exploration and study of limestone caves, to 1900 » (1992), does not validate Louis BALSAN's thesis. Because the 17th century signatures of the Faux-monnyeurs Cave attest to the frequentation of curious people, scholars and notables who came to the cave to admire the wonders of nature.

We can see in these signatures the growing interest in the nascent natural sciences where caves are real objects of study. In the 17th century, the fashion was more for cabinets of curiosities. In addition, the tradition of signatures (BIGOT, 2011) makes it possible to attest to an important frequentation during a century marked by the birth of modern science with the Italian astronomer Galileo.

A priori, the visitors who wrote their names on the walls of the cave seem sheltered from need and have no connection with the episode of counterfeiters recounted by Louis BALSAN.

c) A gap in the dated signatures

The absence of signatures dated from the second half of the 17th century to the end of the 18th century remains an unexplained fact. It exists a hiatus in the tradition of visits. We find again signatures in the 19th century, with in particular that of Léo Montet of Millau on the 2nd September 1925.

In general, the tradition of signing in caves continues for several centuries and attests to a certain durability of visits. But in Millau, that's not the case at all; we note the dates of 1618, 1635, 1640, 1649 and 1650. Perhaps we should look in the history of the city of Millau, the reasons for the abandonment of the underground site by the notables. Indeed, the city experienced strong economic growth in the 16th century and became a Protestant stronghold. Calvinism settled in Rouergue and more particularly in the town of Millau which, in 1573, organized the Protestant States General. For a century, Protestants dominated the city politically and economically. In the second half of the 17th century, the Wars of Religion put an end to this domination and disorganized the tanning activity and the glove industry in Millau. Of course, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 forced the Protestants to exile, but emigration to the countries of the Refuge continued between 1560 and 1760. Depending of the intensity of the persecutions, the Huguenots left France more or less early. Thus, the persecutions and the flight of the Protestant elites could justify the interruption of the visits in the Faux-monnyeurs Cave of Millau.

4. The Protestants Cave in Saint-Hippolyte

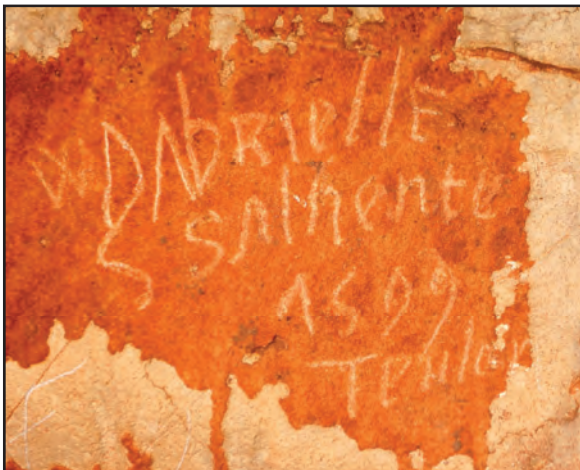


Figure 4: Signature of 1599.

Sometimes called the Camisards or Cengle Cave, its entrance overlooks the village of Saint-Hippolyte. The cave owes its name to the walls erected under the eastern wall of the Cengle Rock, an impregnable haunt of Protestants or Camisards.

The cave appears in a speleological inventory (ASC, 2002) and also in an older article by Jean-Jacques PITTARD (1962). At the bottom of the cave, we are surprised to note the ancient age of the signatures covering the walls which overhang the sump, in particular that of Teulon dated 1599 (Fig. 4). Other signatures from the 17th century validate a coherent whole attesting the ancient frequentation of the cave.

The most ancient signature is: W Gabrielle (de) Salnente 1599 Teulon. The letter W is the Italian abbreviation of

evviva, equivalent in French to « vive! », « long life (to somebody)! ».

Among the graffiti in the Protestants Cave, the following dates should be noted: 1607; 1629 Lablaquière, and also those of Auguste Jeanjean 1887 and Verdier Marius 1887 dit Biblur.

Other ancient signatures are reported in *Les Cahiers du Haut-Vidourle* n° 30: Diane de Trémollet (1686), Védél (1686), Ginoulhac (1687) and Roland (1686).

We note, as well, the absence of signatures throughout the 18th century; the fact is identical in the Faux-monnayeurs Cave in Millau which shows signatures from the 17th and the 19th century, but not from the 18th century.

The precocity of the frequentation of the caves in the Cévennes could be explained by the presence of a ruling and

educated class. In the 17th century, the silkworm industry in Saint-Hippolyte was in Protestant hands but represented only a few percent of the value produced locally. Indeed, a major part of the plain of Saint-Hippolyte was then in cereals and the city a center of wool and leather production. The lack of signatures during the Enlightenment could correspond to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) by Louis XIV and the flight of Protestants to the countries of the Great Refuge.

The protestants or huguenots are educated people who love to explore the strange sites around them. These lettered curious were from the upper class and many of them were Huguenots. This would explain the hiatus of frequentation and the absence of signatures in the 18th century.

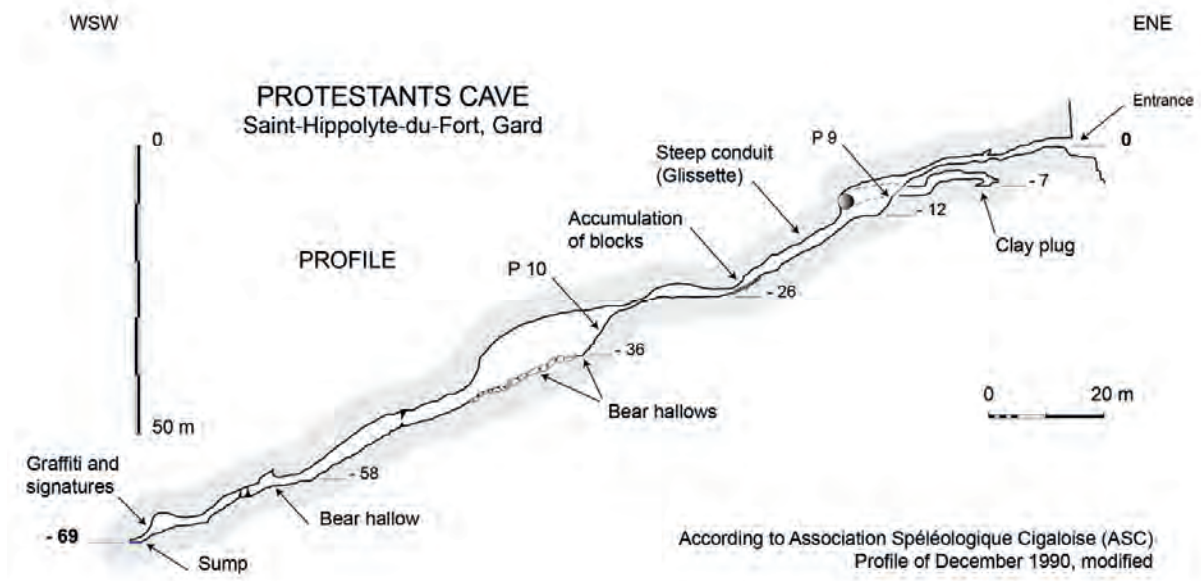


Figure 5: Cross-section of the Protestants Cave, according to ASC 1990 modified.

5. Conclusion

A single cavity without signatures would not have been enough to propose a credible hypothesis. The visit to the Protestants Cave, however, made it possible to reinforce an idea which had emerged from the first incursion into the Faux-monnayeurs Cave: the flight of Protestants to the countries of the Great Refuge. It is interesting to note that a

historical fact can be « read » on the cave walls. Other examples will probably complete the list of caves presenting an interruption in the tradition of signatures. You just have to open your eyes and read into the old graffiti in a different way.

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