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One of the galleries of the Praileaitz cave and a pendant in the shape of Venus found inside the cave.

Cave paintings discovered in Deba, Gipuzkoa

The discovery of cave paintings at Praileaitz I, an archaeological site in the town of Deba, Gipuzkoa, may mark a before and after in how we interpret Basque prehistory. The discovery happened last August, and although data has yet to be verified, there is an atmosphere of great expectation – and a lot of excavating and unearthing still to do.

It is almost certain that these paintings date back further than the impressive portrayals of animals in Ekain, Zestoa (Middle and Upper Magdalenian), and Altxerri in the municipality of Aia (Late Upper Magdalenian) – somewhere between 12,000 and 15,000 years. That means they also predate the Santimamiñe cave paintings in Bizkaia, which date back 13,000 years.

The cave paintings found at Praileaitz I may be as old as 20,000 years and have provisionally been catalogued as representations made during the Solutrean period. For the time being the only thing we know for certain is that the find consists of groups of dots and lines, as opposed to the groups animals (horses, bison, bears, deer, etc.) found in Ekain and Altxerri, the only two caves in Gipuzkoa where paintings have been found.

The Praileaitz I cave was discovered in 1983 by Mikel Sasieta and Juan Arruabarrena, members of the Munibe group of Azkoitia. Since 2000 archaeologist Xabier Peñalver of the Aranzadi Society of Sciences has led a series of excavations in the area. The discovery of five

necklaces with 29 pendants lain hidden for 15,500 turned the spotlight on this cave. All indications point to the site having been used for some sort of magical or spiritual ritual.

Last June the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and the Deba Town Hall signed an agreement whereby the two institutions would contribute 218,000 euros over the next to years to support the excavations undertaken by Xabier Peñalver's team.

The Basque Government has already begun the process of attaining 'cultural property' status for the paintings in accordance with the Basque Cultural Heritage Act of 1990, and has requested the necessary measures be taken to provide the paintings with the highest level of protection.