NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Arte Prehistórico

Idioma: EN

EXAM STATEMENT:

Theoretical part: 1st question: Paleolithic cave art in the Cantabrian region. 2nd question: The art of Phoenician colonization. Practical part: Comment on the figures in the plate that will be provided. The exam, in all its parts, is an exercise in development. This means that it is not merely a matter of listing data or creating an outline with keywords. The practical part is a reasoned commentary on a figure; it is not an excuse to present a theme. The latter will be graded negatively.

Question 1: Paleolithic cave art in the Cantabrian region.

Question 2: The art of Phoenician colonization.

Question 3:
A) Comment on the figures in Plate A
B) Comment on the figures in Plate B

Question 1

Paleolithic cave art in the Cantabrian region.

STUDENT RESPONSE:

Paleolithic cave art in the Cantabrian region constitutes one of the most significant and well-documented expressions of Upper Paleolithic creativity in Europe, primarily concentrated in the northern coastal areas of Spain, encompassing the provinces of Asturias, Cantabria, and the Basque Country. This region, characterized by its rugged limestone and sandstone cliffs along the Cantabrian Mountains, has yielded over 100 known cave sites, many of which feature remarkable examples of parietal art dating from the Aurignacian through the Magdalenian periods (approximately 40,000 to 10,000 BCE). The geographical isolation and protective microclimates of these caves have preserved organic materials, allowing for precise chronological analysis through radiocarbon dating of charcoal, pigment residues, and associated artifacts.

Key sites such as Altamira, El Castillo, Tito Bustillo, and Maltravieso exemplify the region’s artistic richness. Altamira, discovered in 1879, is particularly renowned for its Magdalenian polychrome engravings and paintings, including the iconic bison panels, which demonstrate sophisticated techniques involving red ochre, charcoal, and manganese-based pigments applied with fine brushes or by blowing pigment through hollow bones. El Castillo, meanwhile, contains some of the oldest known cave art in Europe, with Aurignacian engravings and hand stencils dating to around 40,000 BCE, alongside later Magdalenian paintings. These sites collectively reveal a complex chronological evolution: Aurignacian and Gravettian periods feature engravings and simple red ochre paintings, while the Magdalenian phase (c. 15,000–10,000 BCE) marks the zenith of artistic expression, characterized by polychrome compositions, intricate linear styles, and symbolic motifs.

Technically, the art employs two primary methods: engraving (incision into rock surfaces) and painting (application of mineral pigments). Engraving, often used for smaller-scale depictions like animals or abstract signs, required precise tooling with stone or bone points. Painting, however, dominated the larger panels, with artists utilizing natural rock formations to create dynamic compositions. For instance, at El Castillo, the "Sala de los Saltos" features a sequence of hand stencils and animal figures arranged in a spatial narrative that suggests ritual or shamanic contexts. The use of polychrome—combining red ochre with black charcoal—enhanced visual depth and symbolic complexity, as seen in the multi-layered depictions of bison at Altamira, where overlapping figures and stylized forms convey movement and interaction.

Thematic categories are predominantly centered on fauna, especially large mammals like bison, horses, and ibex, reflecting the subsistence economies of hunter-gatherer societies. However, the presence of abstract signs, geometric patterns, and human figures (rarely depicted in full) indicates a symbolic dimension beyond mere representation. At Tito Bustillo, for example, a series of abstract engravings alongside detailed animal representations suggests a transition toward more complex iconography. Hand stencils, often created by blowing pigment around the hand, serve as both individual signatures and ritual markers, while the frequent depiction of animals in dynamic poses—such as the

leaping bison at Altamira—implies narratives of hunting success or spiritual encounters.

Formal composition is highly sophisticated, with artists leveraging the cave's natural topography to create immersive experiences. The spatial arrangement of figures often follows the cave's curvature, using light and shadow to enhance three-dimensionality. At Maltravieso, for instance, the placement of bison figures within deep recesses creates a sense of depth, while the use of perspective—evident in the overlapping forms of horses—demonstrates an early understanding of spatial relationships. The integration of natural rock features, such as stalactites or protrusions, into the composition further underscores the artists' intent to harmonize with the cave environment, suggesting a ritual or cosmological function.

Interpretations of meaning remain contested but are increasingly informed by interdisciplinary approaches. The art is widely regarded as a manifestation of symbolic thought, reflecting cognitive advancements in Upper Paleolithic societies. Ritualistic or shamanic practices are frequently proposed, with the cave environment serving as a liminal space for spiritual transformation. For example, the repetition of animal motifs and the inclusion of abstract signs may indicate ritualized hunting practices or ancestral veneration. Additionally, the communal nature of cave art—evidenced by multiple overlapping styles and pigments across different periods—suggests collaborative creation, possibly linked to social cohesion or identity formation. Recent studies also emphasize the role of these sites as educational spaces, where knowledge of animals and landscapes was transmitted through symbolic representation.

The Cantabrian region's cave art holds exceptional significance in the broader context of Paleolithic studies. Its high density of sites, combined with well-preserved organic remains, provides unparalleled insights into the technological, aesthetic, and cognitive capabilities of early humans. UNESCO's designation of the "Caves of Altamira and the Surrounding Sites" as a World Heritage Site (2008) underscores its global importance, while ongoing research continues to refine our understanding of its chronology and meaning. Ultimately, this corpus of art represents not only a pinnacle of prehistoric creativity but also a critical window into the emergence of symbolic communication and ritual behavior in human evolution.

Question 2

The art of Phoenician colonization.

STUDENT RESPONSE:

The art of Phoenician colonization, spanning the late Bronze Age to the early Iron Age (c. 1200–800 BCE), represents a significant yet understudied chapter in Mediterranean artistic history, primarily documented through archaeological evidence from their extensive maritime settlements across the Levant, North Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula. Originating in the coastal cities of the Levant—particularly Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre—Phoenician colonists established trading posts and urban centers, such as Carthage in North Africa and Gadir (Cadiz) in Hispania, driven by economic imperatives and the dissemination of their distinctive cultural and artistic practices. This colonization facilitated the transmission of a cohesive yet adaptable artistic vocabulary, characterized by geometric abstraction, stylized naturalism, and a functionalist aesthetic, which profoundly influenced regional art traditions while retaining core Phoenician elements.

Phoenician art is most visibly manifested in material culture, particularly in ceramics, metalwork, and architectural ornamentation. Their pottery, exemplified by the ubiquitous *pithoi* and *amphorae*, featured bold geometric patterns—such as zigzags, chevrons, and concentric circles—often painted in manganese or manganese oxide on a reddish-brown slip. These motifs, while abstract, conveyed symbolic meaning linked to cosmological concepts, trade routes, and ritual practices. Metalwork, including jewelry and small bronze figurines, displayed refined craftsmanship, with motifs like the "Phoenician style" (e.g., the *giraffe* or *unicorn* motifs) reflecting a blend of Levantine iconography and local adaptations. Architectural elements, such as the *sarcophagus* of the Phoenician elite in Carthage or the *temple* structures at Motya, incorporated stylized palmettes and lotus scrolls, demonstrating a preference for curvilinear forms and repetitive patterns that emphasized order and continuity.

Crucially, Phoenician artistic influence was not merely imitative but catalyzed cultural synthesis. In Iberia, for instance, Phoenician settlements like Gadir and Emporion introduced pottery styles with geometric designs that merged with indigenous Iberian traditions, creating hybrid forms such as the *Gadir ware* or *Iberian-Phoenician* amphorae. Similarly, in North Africa, the Carthaginian adaptation of Phoenician art—evident in the intricate *frescoes* of Carthage's *Byrsa* hill—incorporated local motifs while retaining the Phoenician emphasis on symbolic representation. This synthesis was further reinforced by the Phoenician alphabet, which, though primarily a writing system, influenced artistic conventions in inscribed objects, such as the *cuneiform* tablets at Kition or the *carved stone* inscriptions in the Levant, where letters often integrated into decorative schemes.

Moreover, Phoenician art served functional and ideological purposes beyond aesthetics. Their trade networks facilitated the exchange of artistic techniques and materials, such as the use of *cinnabar* in pigments or *copper* alloys, which were disseminated across the Mediterranean. Ritual objects, including the *terracotta figurines* depicting deities like Baal Hammon or Melqart, underscored the religious dimension of their art, bridging cosmological beliefs between the Levant and colonized regions. However, the Phoenicians’ artistic legacy is often

overshadowed by later Carthaginian and Punic developments, yet it remains foundational to the Mediterranean art historical narrative, particularly in the Iberian Peninsula where it directly shaped the artistic identity of early Iron Age cultures.

In conclusion, the art of Phoenician colonization exemplifies the dynamic interplay between diffusion, adaptation, and innovation in ancient art. While defined by its geometric precision and functionalist ethos, it transcended mere stylistic transfer, acting as a catalyst for cultural exchange that left indelible marks on the artistic landscapes of North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, and Iberia. Its study reveals how maritime expansion facilitated artistic dialogue, challenging the notion of isolated artistic traditions and highlighting the interconnectedness of Mediterranean societies during the first millennium BCE. This perspective remains vital for understanding the broader context of ancient artistic production and its enduring influence on subsequent cultural developments.

Question 3

Comment on the figures in Plate A

Figura 1

STUDENT RESPONSE:

Plate A presents a lithic artifact, a fragmented stone slab, exhibiting incised engravings that depict a stylized bovid figure. The medium is a naturally fractured rock fragment, with visible weathering and surface irregularities, indicating exposure to environmental elements. The engraving technique employs continuous, shallow lines to outline the animal's form, emphasizing a rounded body and prominent horns through minimalistic, schematic representation. This abstract style, devoid of detailed anatomical features, aligns with Upper Paleolithic artistic conventions, specifically the Magdalenian period (c. 17,000–12,000 BCE), when portable art and symbolic representation flourished in Western Europe. The artifact’s portability suggests it was likely used as a ritual object or talisman, reflecting the transition from purely functional stone tools to items imbued with spiritual significance. The deliberate abstraction of the figure implies a shift toward symbolic communication, possibly linked to hunting practices, shamanistic rituals, or cosmological beliefs. The preservation of the engraving on the stone indicates intentional creation and use within a context where such objects served as material conduits for cultural and religious expression, highlighting the integration of art into prehistoric social and spiritual life.

Question 4

Comment on the figures in Plate B

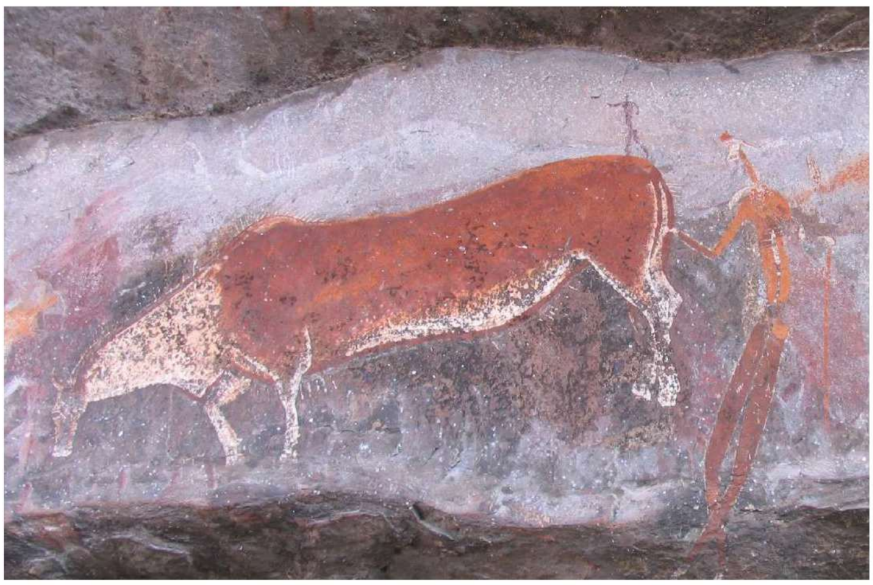

Figura 2

STUDENT RESPONSE:

Plate B depicts a Paleolithic cave painting from the Cantabrian region of Spain, characteristic of the Upper Paleolithic Magdalenian period (c. 17,000–12,000 BCE). The artwork features a large bison rendered in red ochre with white outlines, positioned centrally to dominate the composition, alongside a stylized human figure holding a spear. This technique reflects the use of mineral pigments—primarily iron oxide for red ochre and charcoal for white accents—mixed with binding agents like animal fat or plant-based substances, applied to the natural rock surface. The bison's anatomical precision, including its curved horns and muscular form, demonstrates the Magdalenian focus on naturalistic representation, while the human figure's elongated proportions and dynamic pose suggest narrative intent, likely symbolizing the hunter's relationship with the animal. Thematically, this scene aligns with Paleolithic art's emphasis on fauna and subsistence practices, reflecting both practical concerns for hunting success and ritualistic significance, possibly tied to shamanic or communal ceremonies. The cave wall's uneven texture and the deliberate placement of figures within the natural rock formation underscore the site's role as a sacred space, where prehistoric communities expressed symbolic communication and cultural identity. This artwork exemplifies the sophisticated artistic traditions of the Magdalenian era in the Cantabrian region, contributing to the broader understanding of early symbolic behavior, technological innovation, and the socio-cultural complexity of hunter-gatherer societies.