

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 important and best-preserved corpora of Upper Paleolithic parietal art in Europe. Located along the northern coast of the Iberian Peninsula, mainly in present-day Asturias, Cantabria and the Basque Country, this region forms part of the Franco-Cantabrian artistic province, characterized by a high density of decorated caves, technical sophistication and thematic coherence.

Chronologically, Cantabrian cave art spans much of the Upper Paleolithic, from the Aurignacian to the Magdalenian, with a particular florescence during the Solutrean and, above all, the Magdalenian. Radiocarbon dating and stylistic analysis allow the identification of successive phases, from early simple engravings and schematic signs to later naturalistic polychrome compositions. The long duration of artistic activity reflects the sustained occupation of the region by hunter-gatherer groups attracted by its ecological richness.

The supports used are the limestone walls and ceilings of caves, often selected for their morphology, relief and visibility. Artists took advantage of natural features such as bulges, fissures or concavities to enhance volume and movement. Techniques include engraving, painting in red and black pigments, and combined techniques. Red pigments were generally derived from iron oxides, while black came from charcoal or manganese dioxide. The most complex works employ polychromy, shading and perspective, demonstrating advanced technical mastery.

The thematic repertoire is dominated by animal representations, especially large herbivores such as bison, horses, deer, aurochs and goats, which reflect both the faunal environment and the symbolic importance of game animals. Carnivores are less frequent, and human figures are rare and usually schematic or fragmentary. Alongside figurative motifs, a wide range of signs appears, including dots, lines, claviforms, tectiforms and other abstract symbols, whose meaning remains debated but which clearly formed part of a shared symbolic system.

Among the most outstanding sites is the cave of Altamira, often described as the "Sistine Chapel of Paleolithic art", famous for its polychrome bison painted on the ceiling, dated mainly to the Magdalenian. Other key Cantabrian caves include Castillo, with a long sequence of engravings and paintings possibly beginning in the Aurignacian; Las Chimeneas and La Pasiega, notable for their complex signs and stratified decorative phases; Tito Bustillo, with both figurative and abstract art; and Ekain, renowned for its dynamic horses. Together, these sites illustrate the diversity and continuity of artistic expression in the region.

Interpretations of Cantabrian cave art have evolved from early aesthetic or hunting-magic explanations to more complex approaches that emphasize social, symbolic and cognitive dimensions. Current perspectives consider cave art as part of structured ritual practices, possibly linked to territoriality, group identity, mythological narratives or shamanic experiences, though no single interpretation fully explains all manifestations.

In sum, Paleolithic cave art in the Cantabrian region represents a central chapter in prehistoric art due to its chronological depth, technical excellence, thematic richness and exceptional preservation. It provides fundamental evidence for understanding the symbolic behavior, social organization and cognitive capacities of Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherer societies in Western Europe.

Question 2

The art of Phoenician colonization.

STUDENT RESPONSE:

The art of Phoenician colonization must be understood as a phenomenon closely linked to the expansion of Levantine communities throughout the Mediterranean from the late 9th century BC onwards, especially along the coasts of the central and western Mediterranean. Rather than a homogeneous or monumental artistic system, Phoenician colonial art is characterized by its hybridity, its strong craft orientation, and its role as a vehicle for cultural transfer between the Eastern Mediterranean and indigenous societies.

Phoenician art in colonial contexts derives from the Syro-Palestinian tradition of the Iron Age, itself deeply influenced by earlier Egyptian and Mesopotamian models. This eclecticism is one of its defining traits. Artistic production did not aim at innovation but at the adaptation and recombination of established iconographies and techniques to new environments and markets. As a result, Phoenician colonial art is best approached through specific categories of material culture rather than through large architectural or sculptural programs.

Architecture in Phoenician colonies was generally functional and modest. Urban layouts, as documented in sites such as Tyre's colonies in the western Mediterranean, Gadir (Cádiz), Motya, or Carthage, show planned settlements with defensive walls, harbors, domestic spaces, and sanctuaries. Religious architecture includes open-air sanctuaries and tophets, especially in Carthage and its sphere of influence, associated with ritual practices involving stelae and votive deposits. These stelae, often decorated with symbols such as the sign of Tanit, crescent moons, solar disks, or schematic anthropomorphic figures, constitute one of the most characteristic artistic expressions of Phoenician colonial religion.

Sculpture is relatively limited and usually small in scale. Stone sculpture includes funerary stelae, betyls, and occasional anthropomorphic representations with rigid frontal poses and schematic features. These works reflect Near Eastern conventions rather than Greek naturalism. More significant is the production of small bronzes and figurines, often representing deities, worshippers, or animals, which circulated widely through trade networks.

One of the most important fields of Phoenician colonial art is minor arts and luxury crafts. Metalwork, particularly in bronze, gold, and silver, shows high technical skill and rich iconography. Jewelry, amulets, and ritual objects frequently incorporate Egyptian motifs such as the eye of Horus, scarabs, sphinxes, and lotus flowers, adapted to Phoenician religious beliefs. Scarabs, often imported or locally produced, played a key role as seals and amulets and are a clear indicator of Phoenician presence in the western Mediterranean.

Ivory carving is another outstanding artistic expression, although more prominent in the Eastern Mediterranean, its influence reached colonial areas through trade. Ivories decorated with vegetal motifs, animals, and mythological scenes exemplify the synthesis of Egyptian, Assyrian, and Levantine traditions that characterizes Phoenician art.

Ceramics in Phoenician colonies combine imported wares from the Levant with local productions. Typical forms include red-slip pottery, oil lamps, amphorae for trade, and ritual vessels. Decoration is generally simple, emphasizing form and surface treatment rather than narrative imagery, which distinguishes Phoenician ceramics from contemporary Greek pottery.

In the western Mediterranean, especially in the Iberian Peninsula, Phoenician colonial art had a profound impact on indigenous societies. Through trade and cultural contact, Orientalizing art developed among local elites, particularly from the 7th century BC. This phenomenon is visible in Tartessian contexts, where local craftsmanship adopted Phoenician techniques, iconographies, and luxury materials, creating hybrid artistic expressions.

In conclusion, the art of Phoenician colonization is defined by its adaptability, its role in long-distance exchange, and its capacity to transmit symbolic and artistic models across the Mediterranean. Rather than producing a unified artistic canon, Phoenician colonies functioned as nodes of cultural interaction, where art became a key instrument of identity, religion, and economic power in a multicultural colonial world.

Question 3

Comment on the figures in Plate A



Figura 1

STUDENT RESPONSE:

Option A) Comment on the figures in Plate A.

The figure shown corresponds to an engraved stone plaquette with a schematic representation executed by incision. The support is a flat slab of stone, probably sandstone or limestone, whose natural fractures have not conditioned the reading of the figure but do participate in its current state of conservation. The technique is simple linear engraving, with shallow, continuous strokes, characteristic of post-palaeolithic graphic traditions.

From a formal point of view, the figure can be interpreted as a schematic anthropomorph. The composition is organized around a central vertical axis suggesting the body, from which lateral lines extend that can be read as arms, possibly raised or extended, and lower lines that may indicate legs. The head is not clearly individualized, a frequent feature in schematic art, where the emphasis is placed on the sign rather than on anatomical realism. There is no attempt at naturalism, volume, or perspective; the image is reduced to essential lines, privileging abstraction and symbolic value.

This type of representation fits well within the schematic art of the Iberian Peninsula, generally dated to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. It is closely related to open-air engravings and portable supports associated with the first productive societies, often interpreted in ritual, symbolic, or territorial contexts. The choice of a mobile support suggests a use beyond mere marking of space, possibly linked to social or ideological practices.

The figure belongs to a broader visual language shared across wide areas of prehistoric Europe, characterized by repetition of standardized motifs, simplicity of execution, and a strong symbolic charge. Its interpretation must therefore be framed within the ideological transformations associated with the emergence of

farming societies, rather than within earlier palaeolithic figurative traditions.

Question 4

Comment on the figures in Plate B

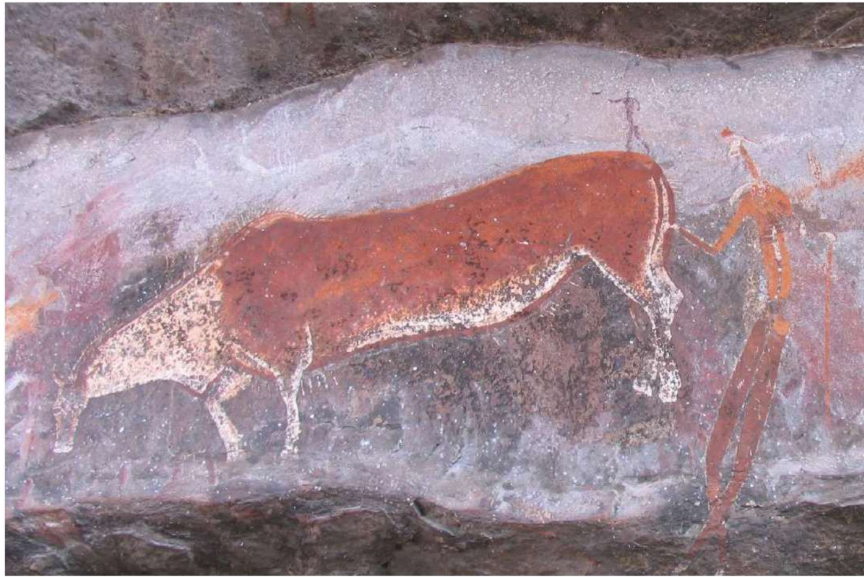


Figura 2

STUDENT RESPONSE:

The figures in Plate B correspond to Levantine rock art from the eastern Iberian Peninsula, a manifestation traditionally dated to the Epipalaeolithic–Mesolithic, with possible prolongation into the early Neolithic. The scene is painted on an open-air rock shelter, using iron-oxide pigments in reddish and ochre tones, applied mainly by flat tint and linear contour, adapted to the natural surface of the rock.

The composition shows a clear narrative intention. An elongated quadruped, identifiable as a deer by its morphology and proportions, occupies the central space. The animal is rendered in profile, with a compact body filled with pigment and legs defined by lighter outlines, suggesting movement. To the right appears a human figure, highly schematized and slender, with long limbs and dynamic posture, holding a bow, clearly engaged in a hunting action. The interaction between human and animal is explicit, emphasizing the scene's narrative and symbolic character rather than a mere isolated representation.

Formally, the figures exhibit the characteristic conventions of Levantine art: stylized human figures with exaggerated limbs, lack of facial detail, and a strong sense of dynamism; animals rendered with greater naturalism but still subordinated to schematic conventions. The spatial organization is simple but effective, with the alignment of figures reinforcing the action and directionality of the hunt.

From an interpretative perspective, the scene reflects the importance of hunting in the social and economic life of these groups, but it also transcends a purely descriptive function. The repeated depiction of hunting scenes in Levantine art suggests ritual, symbolic, or ideological meanings related to social cohesion, territoriality, or cosmological beliefs. The open-air context and visibility of these panels further support their role as communicative and socially shared imagery.

within prehistoric landscapes.

In sum, Plate B exemplifies Levantine rock art through its technique, iconography, narrative composition, and symbolic depth, constituting one of the most distinctive artistic expressions of post-Palaeolithic prehistoric communities in the Iberian Peninsula.