Session: First Marks, First Minds: Early Rock Art and the Emergence of Symbolic Thought

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Abstract
This session focuses on the earliest and oldest known evidence of rock art worldwide, bringing together case studies that illuminate the origins of symbolic behavior in our species and close relatives. It invites contributions on very early graphic productions, from engraved and painted rocks associated with the first expressions of abstract thought, to some of the oldest known figurative depictions in caves and open-air rock shelters. Particular attention will be given to claims for early authorship of rock art, early symbolic markings, and the criteria used to distinguish intentional imagery from non-figurative or natural features. The session welcomes presentations that address methodological challenges in dating, conservation and interpreting these early records, including advances in chronometric techniques and taphonomic analysis. By assembling examples from different continents and traditions, the session aims to discuss convergences and divergences in the emergence of rock art, and to explore what these early visual practices reveal about cognition, social interaction, and the construction of meaningful places in deep time.

Key-words: Earliest rock art; Symbolic origins; Prehistoric imagery; Chronometric dating; Cognitive emergence;