

The enigmatic *Dame à la capuche*

The statuette figure known as *La Dame à la capuche* or *La Figurine à la capuche* (the hooded woman or the hooded figurine) from the cave known as the *grotte du Pape* at Brassempouy in the southwestern corner of France is one of the most frequently reproduced and most known objects in the entire archaeological record. I would like to uncoil what is so unique, rare about this sculpture, making it stand out in the series of the Gravettian figure depictions preserved until today.

La Dame à la capuche had been found during the excavations of Edouard Piette and Joseph de la Porterie, that had taken place from 1894 to 1897. More precisely, it was found by Piette in 1894 on the left-side of *l'Avenue*, an area of roughly 5 m by 5 m and in the level E of the *grotte du Pape*, which is attributed in today's terms to the Gravettian (ca. 28–22,000 BP), where all the many other mammoth-ivory sculpted human images from Brassempouy, except for *Le Torse*, were also found (fig. 1). *La Dame à la capuche* was found in an ochre-stained clay sediment, from which the statuette had taken its yellow hue. The figure was sculpted in the hard, central core of a mammoth tusk and has 3,65 cm in height. Despite the absence of sexual anatomy, it is supposed that this sculpture represents the face of a female.¹ The face is of sub-triangular shape, well balanced, with the forehead, eyebrows, nose and chin in relief, the mouth and ears missing (fig. 2-3). As for the eyes, the only visible part are the pupils, especially the one on the right. A grid pattern made of vertical incisions decorates the top and back of the head and falls on both sides of the thin neck. Its meaning remains debatable with many interpreting it as braids, a veil, a net, a wig etc.

The techniques used to make this statuette are very complex: incisions for the grid pattern and the facial features, perforation for the pupil of the eyes, scraping and polishing to model the face. The sculpture has a significant fissure along the entire length of the right hemiface, from the “hair” to below the chin. In 1904 Piette donated, and by that ensured the conservation of his collection – almost all the Upper Palaeolithic female figures known to prehistoric science at that time, including *La Dame à la capuche*, to the *National Archaeology Museum* in Saint Germain-en-Laye.

¹ White 2006, p. 298.

The palaeolithic images of women had frequently been the subject of generalizing stereotypes and the diversity of them and possible alternative interpretations have been left out.² As Randall White points out, at the time of the first discoveries in the late 19th century, the main discussion around the palaeolithic images of women focused on the question of their racial origin.³ This view dominated until well after World War I due to the colonialist attitude of the time. The sculptures were read as portraiture, as realistic depictions.⁴ When it comes to *La Dame à la capuche*, Edouard Piette believed that it was a fragment of a full-body sculpture and that the general appearance of the figure would be Mongolian.⁵ He interpreted the grid pattern as an Egyptian-type wig. Since the Second World War there have been many interpretative frames applied to palaeolithic female images with the focus shifting from race to their status as women. Concerning the assemblage of figures from Brassempouy an important re-analysis of Piette's collection, as well as new excavations, were done by Henri Delporte who constructed a credible new synthesis of the site. Concerning *La Dame à la capuche*, he didn't rule out the possibility of the head originally belonging to a body, and he supported the hypothesis of the grid pattern representing a particular arrangement of the hair.⁶ The most recent and relative study of the Brassempouy figures has been carried out by Randall White. He concluded that it is not probable that the head had a corresponding body and that it was more likely supposed to be a self-standing head, which after an accident resulting in a fracture that runs along a part of her posterior surface, was abandoned or "used as it was".⁷ Bearing in mind that all the sculptures found in *l'Avenue* had been somehow damaged during fabrication, he argues that *l'Avenue* in Brassempouy could have been a kind of atelier for ivory-sculpting.⁸

My focus will be on discussing the unique features of *La Dame à la capuche* and what makes her so attractive even without primary and secondary sexual characteristics, that attracts the most attention from the Upper Palaeolithic material culture. If the human, especially female image, has an important place in palaeolithic iconography, the representation of the face is rarer. Nonetheless, several other detailed faces are

² Nelson 1990, p. 11.

³ White 2006, pp. 276-281.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 283.

⁵ Ibidem, pp. 274-275

⁶ Delporte 1993, p. 27.

⁷ White 2006, pp.293-294.

⁸ White 2006, pp.294-296.

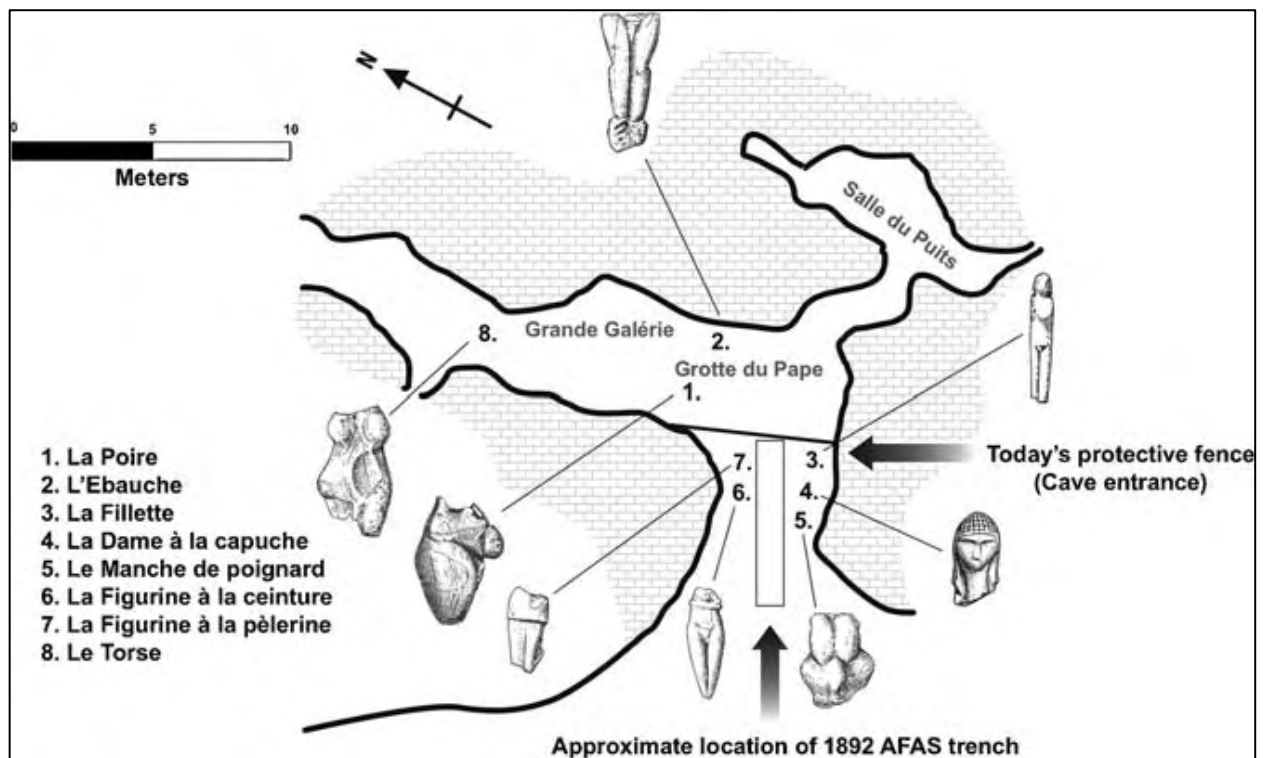
known, such as the *Negroid Head* from Balzi Rossi or *Dolní Věstonice Venus XV* (fig. 4). Beside these more detailed depictions there is a larger group of schematic heads reduced to simple spheres including figures from the sights of Kostenki (fig. 5), Grimaldi, Dolní Věstonice etc. But what makes the representation of our face so special is the geometric construction of it which makes it seem almost modern, contemporary⁹. Its careful construction and the subtle translation of the look through the play of hollows and relief make it unique. Another infrequent and highly discussed feature of *La Dame à la capuche* is the hair/head-covering. Various types of hairdos and head-coverings can also be seen represented on “venuses” (fig. 6) like on the famous *Venus of Willendorf*, which bears a depiction of “a fiber-based woven cap”¹⁰.

All in all, what makes this figure so distinctive from the other Gravettian “venuses” is the presence of both the aspects of a representation of a face and an elaborate hairdo, which is scarce in the Upper Palaeolithic. Another reason for which it is eminent is the mysterious expression in her eyes, which are rendered by controlled abstractionism. Going further, it would be called-for to ask why the statuette *La Dame à la capuche* differs from the other palaeolithic images of women, but knowing that our knowledge of this group of depictions is very limited.

⁹ Simonet 2023.

¹⁰ Soffer, Adovasio, Hyland, 2000, p. 518.

Fig. 1, The approximate find locations of the Brassempouy figurines.



Randall White, 'The Women of Brassempouy: A Century of research and Interpretation', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 2006, No.4., p. 285.

Fig. 2, *La Dame à la capuche*



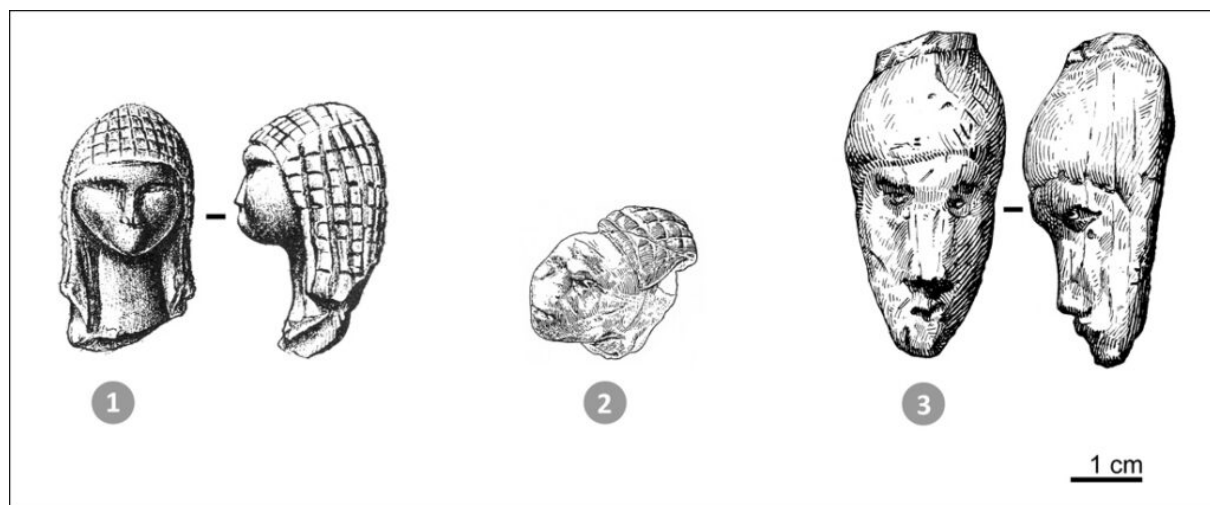
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Fig. 3, *La Dame à la capuche*



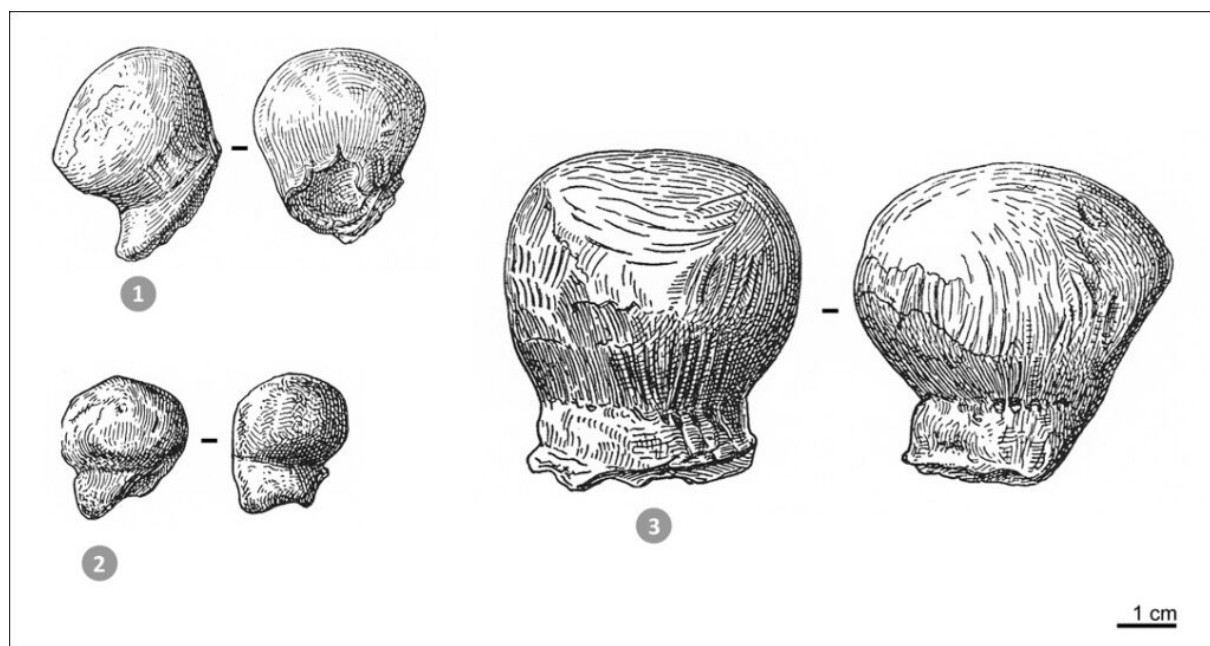
<https://musee-archeologienationale.fr/collection/objet/la-dame-la-capuche>

Fig. 4, Detailed representations of Gravettian human faces. No. 1: La Dame à la capuche (Landes, France), No. 2: Negroid Head from Balzi Rossi (Italy), No. 3: Dolní Věstonice Venus XV (Czech Republic).



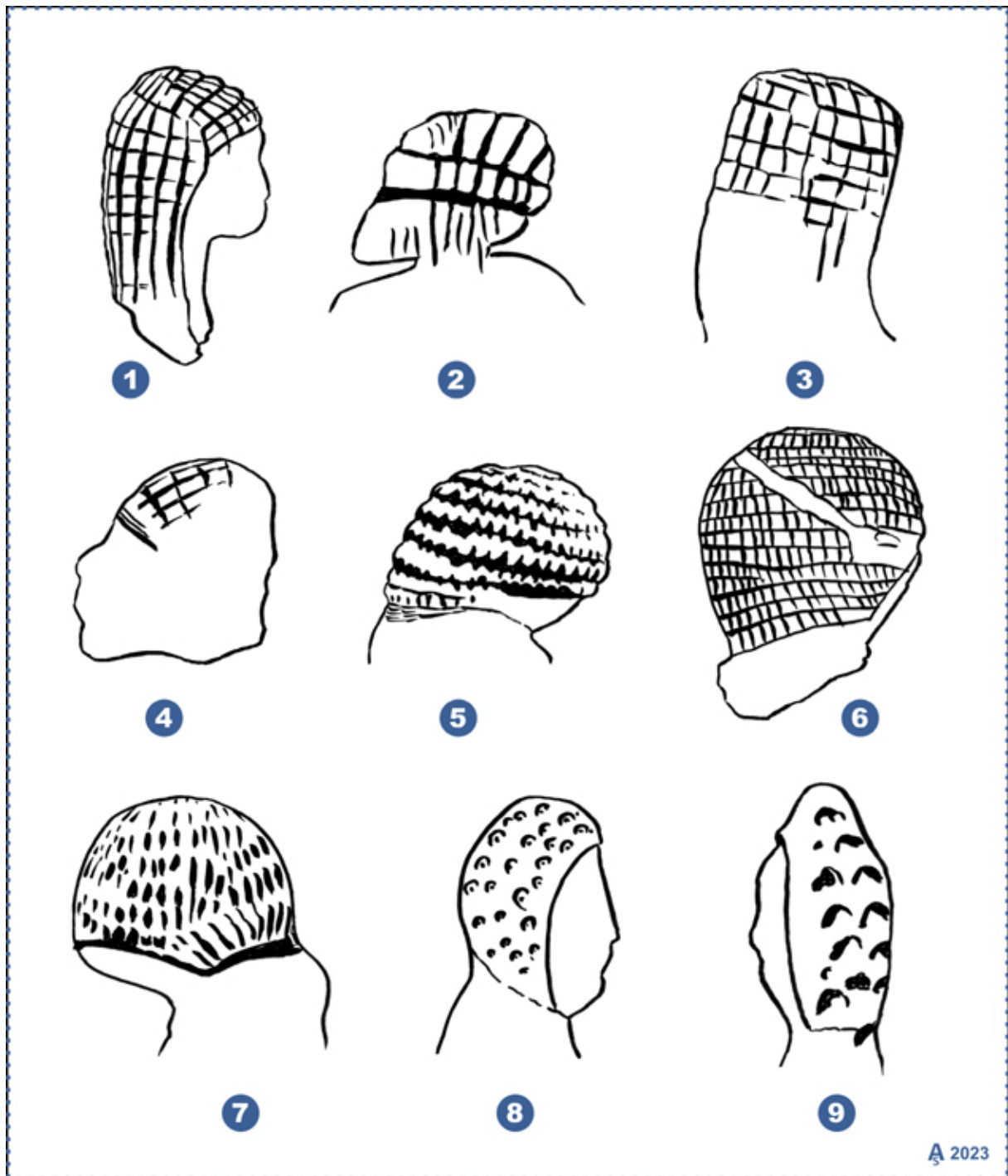
<https://www.hominides.com/art-prehistorique/dame-de-brassempouy/>

Fig. 5, Simplified representations of Gravettian human faces from Kostienki.



<https://www.hominides.com/art-prehistorique/dame-de-brassempouy/>

Fig. 6, Motifs decorating the heads of Gravettian female statuettes. No. 1: La Dame à la capuche (Landes, France), No. 2: the woman with the squared head of Laussel (Dordogne, France), No. 3: the Venus of Renancourt (Somme, France), No. 4: Negroid Head from Balzi Rossi (Italy), No. 5: Venus of Willendorf (Austria), No. 6: the isolated head of Kostenki I-1 (Russia), No 7: statuette 83-2 of Kostenki I-1 (Russia), No. 8: female statuette of Mal'ta (Russia), No. 9: female statuette of Bouret' (Russia).



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