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The Lion Man: an Ice Age masterpiece

Ahead of the exhibition Living with gods, Jill Cook takes a closer look at one of the exhibition's key loans - the Lion Man, an incredible survival from the last Ice Age.



Lion Man from three angles. Stadel Cave, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, 40,000 years old. © Ulmer Museum.

Jill Cook, Keeper of Britain, Europe and Prehistory

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The Lion Man is a masterpiece. Sculpted with great originality, virtuosity and technical skill from mammoth ivory, this 40,000-year-old image is 31 centimetres tall. It his body. He stands upright, perhaps on tiptoes, legs apart and arms to the sides of a slender, cat-like body with strong shoulders like the hips and thighs of a lion. His great the viewer. The details of his face show he is attentive, he is watching and he is listening. He is powerful, mysterious and from a world beyond ordinary nature. He is the does not exist in physical form but symbolises ideas about the supernatural.

The Lion Man. Stadel Cave, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, 40,000 years old. The oldest known evidence of religious belief in the world. © Ulmer Museum.

Found in a cave in what is now southern Germany in 1939, the Lion Man makes sense as part of a story that might now be called a myth. The wear on his body cause around and rubbed as part of a narrative or ritual that would explain his appearance and meaning. It is impossible to know what that story was about or whether he w creation story or a human whose experiences on a journey through the cosmos to communicate with spirits caused this transformation.

Obviously, the story involved humans and animals. Lion Man is made from a mammoth tusk, the largest animal in the environment of that time and depicts the fierces centimetres taller than a modern African lion and had no mane. Distinct from other animals through their use of tools and fire, humans were nonetheless dependent or themselves from predators. Perhaps this hybrid helped people to come to terms with their place in nature on a deeper, religious level or in some way to transcend or r

An experiment by Wulf Hein using the same sort of stone tools available in the Ice Age indicate that the Lion Man took more than 400 hours to make:

This was a lot of time for a small community living in difficult conditions to invest in a sculpture that was useless for their physical survival. Allowing this to be done mi about strengthening common bonds and group awareness to overcome dangers and difficulties. Some support for this exists at the cave itself.

Archaeological discoveries in other caves in this part of Swabia include small sculptures as shown in the British Museum's 2013 exhibition *Ice Age art: arrival of the m* quantities of stone tools and animal bones that indicate people lived in the shelter of the daylight areas of these sites for repeated periods of time.

Stadel Cave, where the Lion Man was found, is different. It faces north and does not get the sun. It is cold and the density of debris accumulated by human activities good place to live. Lion Man was found in a dark inner chamber, carefully put away in the darkness with only a few perforated arctic fox teeth and a cache of reindeer that Stadel Cave was only used occasionally as a place where people would come together around a fire to share a particular understanding of the world articulated to out in rituals.

Lion Man is the oldest known evidence for religious beliefs and Stadel Cave suggests that believing and belonging have a deep history crucial to human societies and UNESCO acknowledged Stadel Cave and other Swabian localities as World Heritage Sites of importance to all humanity and I am delighted that Ulm Museum has loa Museum for the exhibition.

The exhibition *Living with gods: peoples, places and worlds beyond* is on from 2 November 2017 to 8 April 2018. Supported by the Genesis Foundation. With grateful thanks to John Studzinski CBE.

The accompanying BBC Radio 4 series will be broadcast from 23 October 2017. Living with the gods by Neil MacGregor will be published by Allen Lane in March 2018.

Find out more about some of the key objects in the exhibition in this blog post.