



BONE FLUTE

The pieces of evidence for prehistoric musical instruments are scarce and getting more so the further you look back in time. Many resonant bodies enclose a hollow space and have fragile casing made of bone, reed, wood or skin that break easily and are not very well preserved in the ground. And if it is not quite clear what you are looking for, sometimes only chance or inspiration helps.

1994. Dr. Susanne Muenzel from the prehistory department at Tuebingen University sifts out bone fragments found during excavation work in the “Geissenkloesterle” cave near Blaubeuren (Southern Germany). She discovers a small piece of bird bone with two artificial holes in it and assumes it to be part of a flute. After weeks of puzzling she succeeds in assembling the tiny instrument out of 22 single pieces. Its age is amazing: Nearly 35 000 years have gone by since it was broken and trampled into the cave’s loamy soil. From this layer also some of the worlds oldest plastic art have been rescued: Man, mammoth, bear and bison, all of them skilfully carved out of ivory, as well as beads, perforated coloured fish vertebrae and other ornamented items.

But since the flute is only preserved in fragments and you can therefore not play on it any more, the excavator Prof. Hahn and I made a replica, as this was the only way to test and understand the instrument’s character, playability, blowing technique, manufacturing and sound. After many preparatory experiments we finally succeeded in making a replica very near to the original. For this we worked swan bones (that were quite difficult to get) with flint tools as suggested by microscopic traces discovered on the original. A peculiarity of the Geissenkloesterle flute is that the finger holes were not drilled in the instrument’s body, like with the flutes from Isturitz (France) dated to the Gravettian, but carved in or scraped horizontally.



Friedrich Seeberger demonstrated effectively on the Conference on Musical Archaeology in the monastery Michaelstein in 2000 the tiny instrument can produce a whole lot of rather soft, but quite clear notes, forming a full-bodied entity. Whether the original had the same scale cannot be said as the fragmentary state of preservation does not allow to determine the instrument’s original length or the existence of more finger holes.

