

Work on individual Upper Palaeolithic signs generally takes the form of inventories. One sign, Lozenge <◇>, has been interpreted as the stylisation of a fish. Other signs are still incomprehensible, but may have carried ethnoscientific value as shared observations about the world. We report on the cooccurrence of two common signs, <◇> and Pipe <I>. We argue (i) that the meaning of <I> is identifiable from its distribution, and (ii) that its fusion with <◇> into a single sign is semantically compositional.

Through quantitative semiotics, we constructed a corpus of animal images with Pipes, many visibly pregnant. Pipe occurred predominantly in bellies and rumps, both locations for a foetus. Thus, we hypothesise that <I> is a symbol for '(unborn) young'.

The <◇>+<I> combination correlates closely with caves near spawning sites, a critically important Upper Palaeolithic food resource. We interpret the composite sign as an egg-carrying fish, in combination of two independent signs through semantic superposition. This prefigures principles of composition in later writing systems. <◇>+<I> is conceptually contiguous with later (proto)writing and pushes the evidence of writing-like thought further back than previously considered.