

Brief Communication

ANCIENT REPRESENTATIONS OF THE WILDMAN IN FRANCE

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ABSTRACT. Representations of the Wildman exist in many historic places of Europe. Since the fortuitous observation of two of them in an old church of southwestern France, the author has located and photographed others. The most interesting are presented here. For centuries, the Wildman has been known in folklore and traditions, and even pre-historical artists represented hominoids looking different from modern *Homo sapiens*. Scientists now acknowledge that different species of hominins cohabitated in the past, and that the Neanderthals were present with our species in France during tens of thousands of years. A late survival of this “second human” could possibly explain the past stories of Wildmen and their representations.

KEY WORDS: Relict hominoid, Neanderthal, Basajaun, Barmanu

In July 2001, I was in southwestern France when I saw on a tourist leaflet a photograph showing a sculpture on stone of something looking like a hairy man, with a comment explaining that the original, among other carvings, was visible in the old church (built between 1060 and 1083) of the remote village of Sainte-Engrâce (Fig. 1).

I went to this location and discovered this creature depiction (Fig. 2), which was represented beside a flute player. Around the neck of this being is what appears to be a collar and it is probable that the musician is a "shower of hairy man." It is curious to note that a photograph of the sculpture posted in this church is accompanied by a caption that identifies the creature as a bear (Fig. 3). It is clear that the idea, or interpretation of the central figure as a wild and hairy man had not been acknowledged by the local people. Although it is impossible to identify the figure with certainty, its identity as a bear appears

improbable when considering the lack of both a snout and ears atop its head. The flat face, deep set forward-directed eyes and puckered lips appear humanoid (indeed, the pursed lips recall the depiction of the Dsonoqua of the Pacific Northwest of North America). The creature is smaller than the musician and the acrobat, so one could think that this Wildman is of smaller stature, or perhaps a young one.

One year later, I visited this place again. On one of the pillars was a series of small metal heads, which had not drawn my attention at the time of my first visit. I examined them attentively and discovered animal representations: a wolf, a bird (raptor with the hooked beak), and what looked like a Wildman with a flattened nose and open nostrils, turned strongly forwards (Fig. 4). Mingled with animals living in the mountains surrounding Sainte-Engrâce (wolves were still extant in this region in the 11th century), this Wildman head is the second potential representation of a

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relict hominoid in that church.

In this region of southwestern France called “Pays Basque” (Basque Country), there are many old stories about the “Basajaun” (Wildman – “King (or Lord) of the forest”), said to be not different from a wild beast, hairy as a bear, feeding on grass or game. Some writers have compared this creature to satyrs (or fauns) described in Greek myths (Webster, 1877). In Basque mythology, Basajaun (plural: Basajaunak) is a huge hominoid dwelling in the woods. Its female companion is called “Basandere.” Despite his intimidating appearance, many stories of the Basajaun talk of a benevolent giant, and a friend to the Basque shepherds.

After these discoveries, I continued to search for other representations of these creatures in other regions of France. In the beginning of 2004, I travelled to the region of Bretagne (northwestern France) to look for an old carving (dated from 1509) known to be in the Cathedral of Tréguier. It was not easy to find because it was in an obscure place in the Cathedral. The Wildman was in this instance carved on wood (Fig. 5), and again depicted with a distinctive upturned nose (Fig. 6).

The well-known and controversial case of the “Iceman” was described by Bernard Heuvelmans (1974) in his book *L’Homme de Néanderthal est toujours vivant*. This purported “*Homo pongoides*,” had features comparable to the fossil hominin *Homo neanderthalensis* and curiously, had this same particular nose shape.

Another time, I was in Paris and out of curiosity, examined the Cathedral Notre Dame, searching for sculptures on the walls. I found again depictions of hairy hominoids mingled with *Homo sapiens* (Fig. 7). The building of the cathedral started in 1163 during the reign of King Louis VII, and was completed in 1345.

In July 2005, I travelled in the East of France and wanted to see another interesting sculpture on stone, in the town of Semur-en-

Auxois. I photographed this Wildman in the entrance of the old church “Notre Dame,” built in the 11th century. The Wildman holds the arm of a person who is possibly another “shower of hairy man” (Fig. 8). The low forehead, deep-set eyes, broad and deep facial proportions stand in contrast of the depiction of the human face, and echo the distinctive cranial features of the Neanderthal skull.

If one turns around the church, it is possible to see other interesting representations, mingling two sorts of hominoids. One of them is clearly *Homo sapiens*, and the other shows characteristics of another hominoid, different from our species (Fig. 9).

I have had the opportunity to observe other Wildman representations in France, however, the select cases I described above are the most interesting. Many additional sculptures or drawings exist elsewhere throughout Europe (e.g. Husband and Gilmore-House, 2013).

What are we to think about these hominoid representations? Do they come from the human imagination? Are they only elements of folklore? The problem is that many old stories are associated with these representations, making it difficult to disentangle potential fact from fiction.

The last French encounters with the Wildman are historically known from the Basque Country. According to Michel Raynal (1989), the engineer Julien David Leroy wrote in his work on logging in the mountains of the Pyrenees that in 1774, the pastors of the Iraty Forest (region of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port) often saw a Wildman, described as shaggy like a bear. Other testimonies came from nearby Spain (Iraty forest is at the frontier).

In the same region were also found prehistoric clues of a past presence of a second species of hominin. In the cave of Isturitz, one can see a rupestrian engraving (Fig. 10) which represents a head in profile, strongly evoking a Neanderthal, particularly because of the nasal area and the jaws both projected forwards (oncognathism characteris-

tic of this hominin; Rak, 1984). One more time, the up-turned nose is portrayed prominently.

In the same cave was found an engraved reindeer bone showing two humanoid creatures that are only partially represented (Fig. 11). On the back of this bone are two bison, also illustrated in part. In the reception of the cave, one can see a cast of this bone, but the original is in the Museum of National Antiquities at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, close to Paris. These engravings are dated to about 15,000 years ago. The hominoids of the Isturitz bone are clearly not *Homo sapiens*. There are marks of hair on the massive body. According to Heuvelmans (1974), the arrow in the leg and the links around the neck and hand could suggest that these creatures were killed by hunters (likewise for the bison figured on the other side of the bone).

It should be known that for obscure reasons, prehistoric men represented themselves only rarely, most likely due to superstitions. Generally, if they did draw human figures, it was by using crude drawings, with some simple rounds and strokes, unlike the superb engravings of mammoths, bison, aurochs, and others that they left us. There are nevertheless exceptions, like the cave of "La Marche", where one may find many representations of *Homo sapiens* heads (Fig. 12), interesting for comparison. This cave is in the region Poitou-Charentes, in the West of France (near the town of Lussac-les-Châteaux). The drawings are dated to 14,000 years ago.

In January 2002, the French scientific magazine *Sciences et Avenir* (issue 659) titled: "Neandertal, l' extraordinaire histoire du deuxième homme" (Neandertal, the extraordinary story of the second human; Fig. 13). The two species, *H. sapiens* and *H. neanderthalensis*, were now clearly separated, in terms of morphology, behavior and genetics. [Note: the two orthographies "Neanderthal" and "Neandertal" are accepted]

In December 2004, the same magazine

(issue 694) published an article titled "Le troisième homme" (the third human) after the discovery of *Homo floresiensis*. Paleo-anthropologists began to consider that different species of hominins cohabitated in past periods (we can now add the discovery of Denisovans in the Altai Mountains in Siberia, and the likely late persistence of *Homo heidelbergensis* in Europe).

It was in this same issue that it was written that after the publication of the issue 659, some readers of *Sciences et Avenir* sent messages to tell that their grandparents or great-grandparents once spoke about their encounters with curious Wildmen, asking if they could have been "Neanderthal" men?

The possibility of the late survival of Neanderthals had earlier received serious scientific discussion with the publication of a paper in *Antiquity* journal, titled, "The case for Neanderthal survival: fact, fiction, or faction?" by archaeologist Myra Shackley (1982).

I will recall that the zoologist Jordi Magraner was doing field research on the Barmanu (local name of the Wildman) in the north of Pakistan (Jordi Magraner was unfortunately assassinated in his house on August 2, 2002). He interviewed witnesses, found footprints attributed to the Barmanu, and reported hearing two series of unusual guttural sounds, which he believed could have been made by the elusive Wildman (Magraner, 1992). In 1988, he made a drawing of a Barmanu (Fig. 14), helped by a shepherd named Purdum Khan. The witness closely observed this hominin during two hours, in September 1977, in the mountains at an altitude of 3400-3500 m. It is really interesting to compare this drawing with some of the most precise past representations of the Wildman in medieval art, suggesting that it could be the same hominoid, perhaps a surviving Neanderthal, or allied hominin, still at large in the remote mountainous parts of Eurasia, and who could have existed in France in historic times.

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Olivier Décobert has taught physics and chemistry since 1990. He has traveled the world to observe and photograph nature and animals. Destinations have included (in chronological order) the Antilles, Malaysia, French Guiana, Kenya, Canada, USA, Morocco, Madagascar, Canary Islands, Peru, Nepal, and Tunisia as well as much of Europe. He is a frequent contributor and editor of *SCARABS*, newsletter of The Coleopterists Society. He first encountered information on relict hominoids in 1985, through reading a book by the late French zoologist Jean-Jacques Barloy Ph.D., *Les survivants de l'ombre: enquête sur les animaux mystérieux* (*The Shadow Survivors: Investigation of Mysterious Animals*).

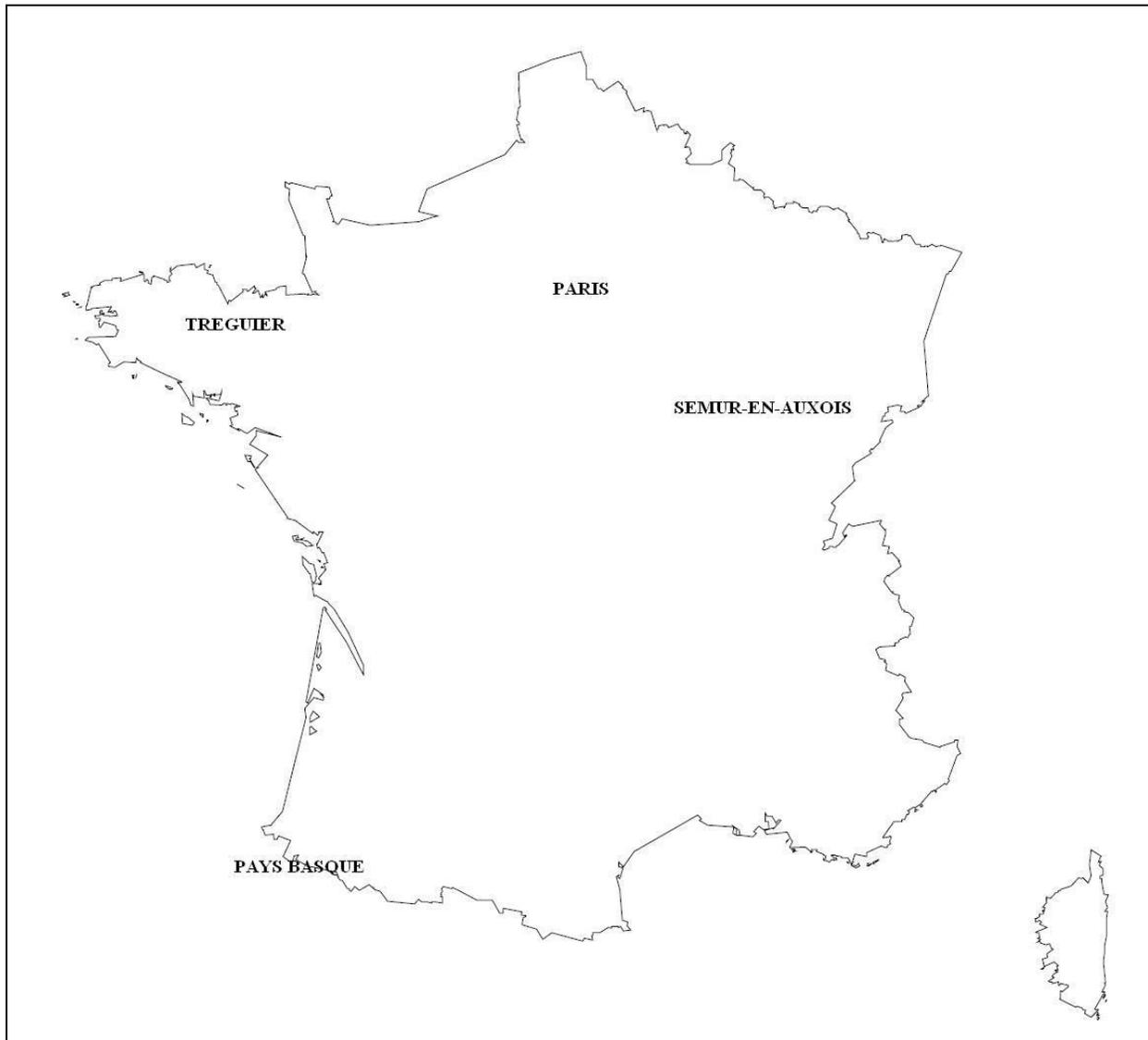


Figure 1. Map of France indicating the locations cited in this article. Ancient representations of the Wildman are known in many regions of France, and elsewhere throughout Europe.



Figure 2. Carvings in an 11th century church in Sainte-Engrâce, France, possibly depicting a hair-covered Wildman with pursed lips, at the center.



Figure 3. Photograph posted in the church to accompany the sculpture. Its caption reads: “Joueur de flute, ours et bateleur” (flute player, bear, and acrobat), as seen from R to L.



Figure 4. Also in the church in Sainte-Engrâce, France, are animal representations: a wolf, a bird (raptor with the hooked beak), and possible Wildman with a flattened nose and open nostrils, turned strongly forwards.



Figure 5. In the region of Bretagne (northwestern France) an early 16th century depiction of a club-wielding Wildman in the Cathedral of Tréguier.



Figure 6. Facial details of the Wildman in the Cathedral of Tréguier. Note especially the upturned nose.



Figure 7. Wildmen mingling with people. The Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris (12th - 14th centuries).



Figure 8. The Wildman holds the arm of a person who is possibly a “shower of hairy man,” over a portal in the 11th century church in Semur-en-Auxois.



Figure 9. Another possible Wildman (below) in contrast to a human (above) at Semur-en-Auxois.



Figure 10. A rupestrian engraving from the cave of Isturitz (left) bearing striking resemblance to the distinctive features of the Neanderthal skull from La-Chapelle-aux-Saints (right).



Figure 11. Reindeer bone from the cave at Isturitz, showing two humanoid creatures.

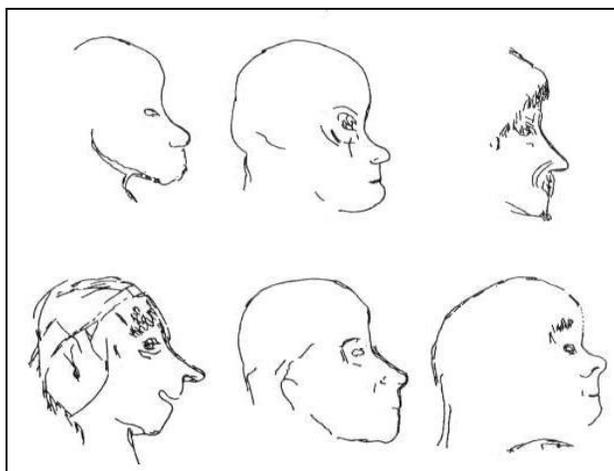


Figure 12. Various depictions of *Homo sapiens* in the cave of "La Marche", in the region Poitou-Charentes, in the West of France (near the town of Lussac-les-Châteaux).

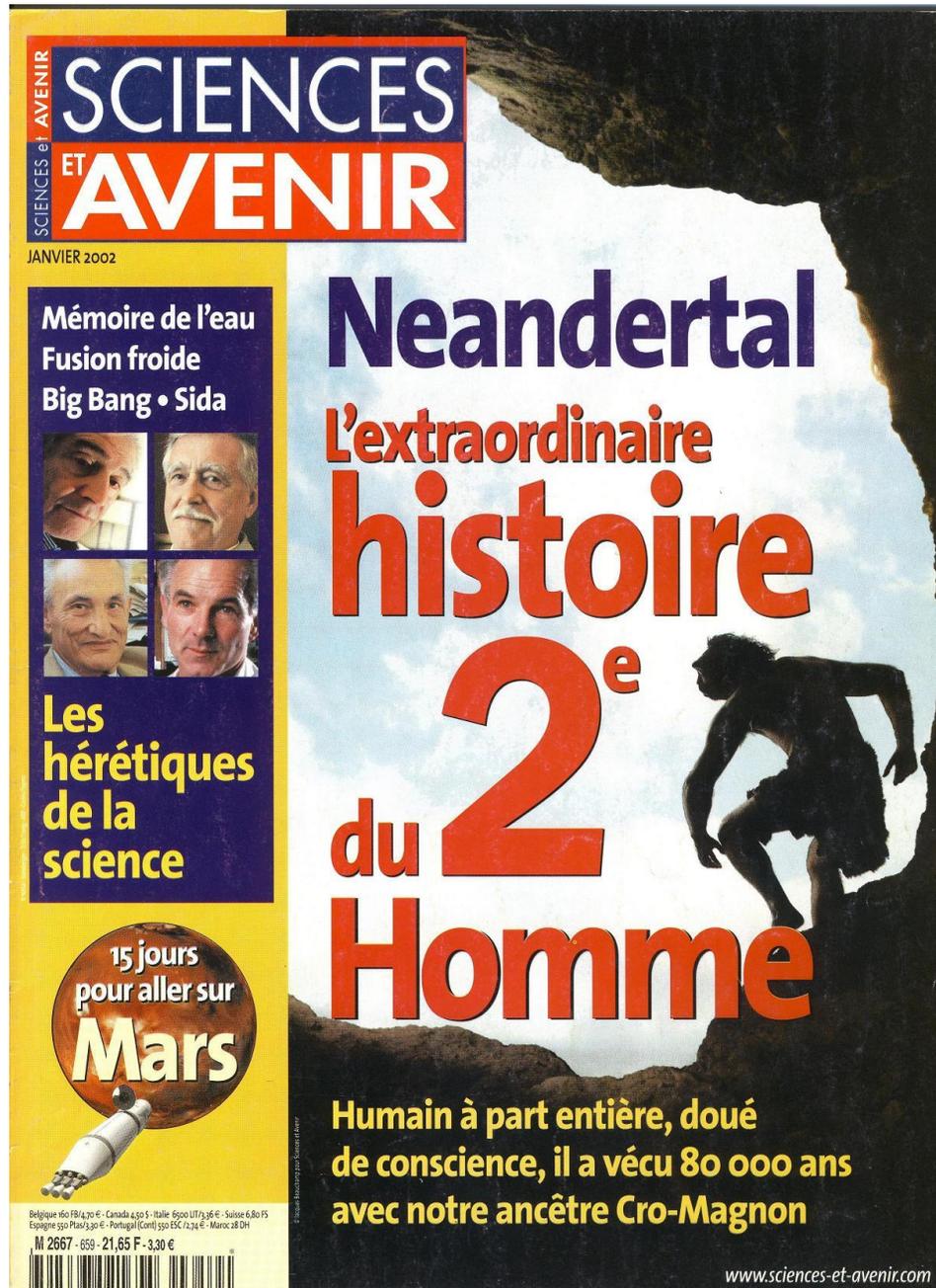


Figure 13. January 2002 (issue 659) of the French scientific magazine *Sciences et Avenir*. Cover story title translates: Neandertal, the extraordinary story of the second human.

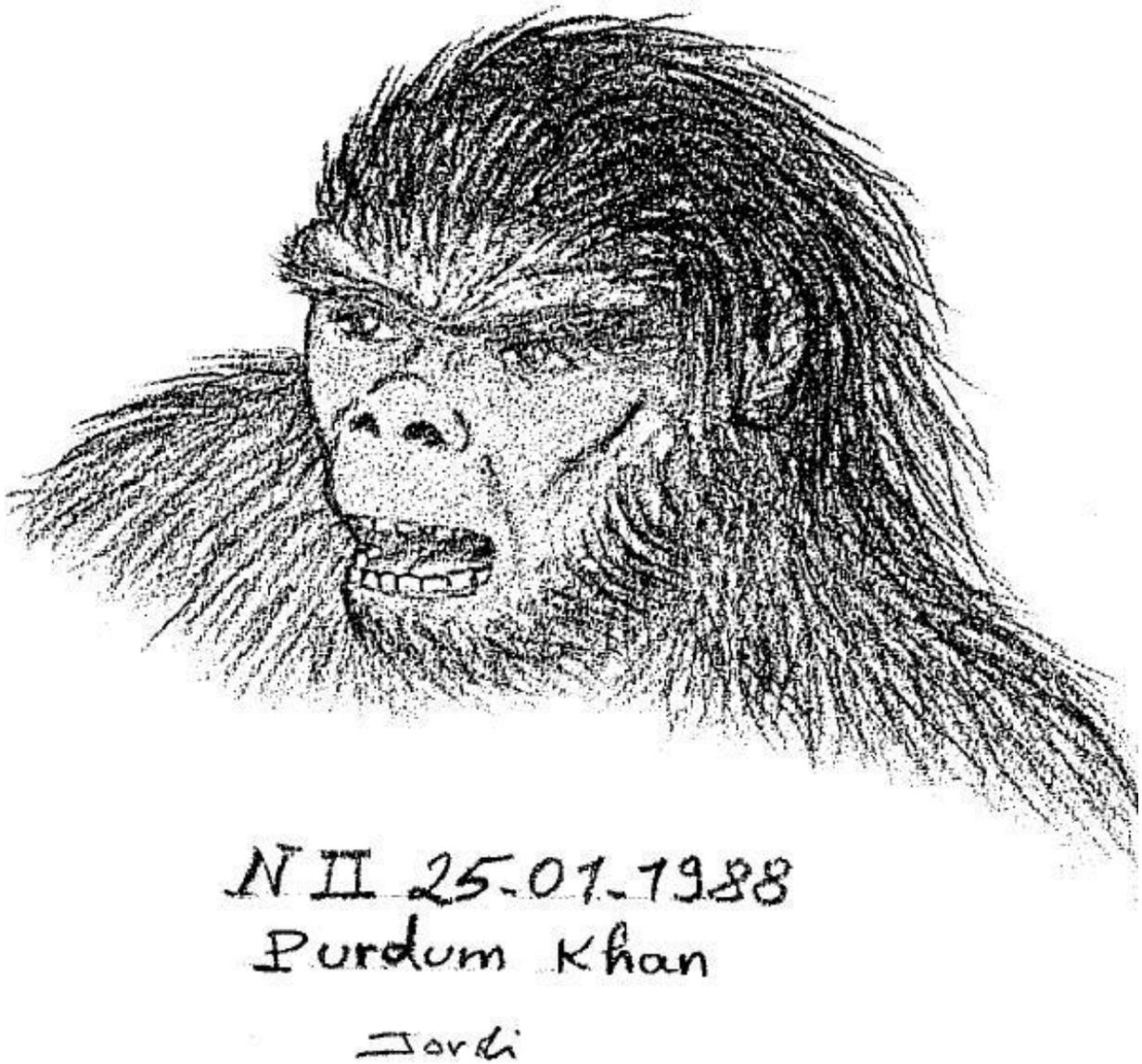


Figure 14. Drawing of a Barmanu by Jordi Magraner, as described by a shepherd named Purdum Khan, who observed this hominoid in the mountains of north Pakistan.