

dig lay in crates housed first at Tübingen University, then in an air raid shelter in Ulm, before finally reaching the city museum there. The task of sorting and publishing the material from the cave excavation of thirty years previously was eventually given to its curator, Joachim Hahn, in 1969.

Within just a few days, something remarkable happened. Hahn and two colleagues realized that 200 or so of the mammoth ivory fragments could be put together to form a standing figure, around thirty centimetres in height. What was more, this figure was human – but not entirely so. In its incomplete state, Hahn thought it might be part bear. But with the incorporation of more fragments discovered some years later, the full pattern finally became clear. This was indeed a human body, but with the head of a lion. He quickly became known as *der Löwenmensch*, ‘the Lion Man’.

Legs apart, arms a little out from his sides, he stands upright, perhaps on tiptoe, leaning slightly forward: a macho, somewhat aggressive pose. The calves, carefully shaped, are clearly human, and the navel is just where it ought to be on a model of a man. The upper body is slender, more feline, but on top of it are strong shoulders and an extraordinary head.

Jill Cook is the British Museum’s expert in deep history:

*This is the head of a cave lion, common in Ice Age Europe, and bigger than the modern African lion. The head is looking at us with a powerful, direct gaze. The mouth seems almost to smile. The ears are cocked, and inside them you can see the small opening for the auditory canal. When you look in detail at the back, you can see behind the ear little furrows, formed where the muscles contract to turn the ear in order to listen. This is not a human being wearing a mask. This is a creature, albeit a creature that cannot exist. And he is attentive, he is listening, he is watching.*

Radiocarbon dating indicates that the Lion Man is around 40,000 years old, which means it was made towards the end of the last



The head of the Lion Man, listening and watching

Ice Age, a dating supported by information gathered from other material found in the area. If that is indeed the case, as seems probable, then this small sculpture holds a unique place in human history. It is not just a supreme representation of two closely observed species: it is by some margin the oldest evidence yet found of the human mind giving physical form to something which can never have been seen. For the first time that we know of, a combination which could exist only in the imagination, an abstraction, has here been made physically graspable. Nature has been re-imagined and reshaped, the boundary between human and animal dissolved. The Lion Man represents a cognitive leap to a world beyond nature, and beyond human experience.