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Jean CLOTTE

PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



WHAT A CARRY ON?

Portable Art and Changes of Symbolic Meaning

Iain DAVIDSON

The motivation for this paper is the continuing publication of maps of European Upper Palaeolithic art sites that omit the site of Parpalló. It asks the question: Why don't people see the importance of Parpalló? It seeks to show the important principles about the study of prehistoric art, particularly of the Pleistocene, that are illustrated by Parpalló.

Parpalló is generally omitted from surveys of Palaeolithic art in Europe, but it should not be. Villaverde's comprehensive analysis showed that the site contains 5034 pieces with art, 6245 decorated surfaces, including 766 images of animals, 446 of which are identifiable to species. This is two orders of magnitude more than have been found in other sites of Mediterranean Spain. These images were executed on small slabs of stone (almost all less than 200 mm maximum dimension) found during Pericot's stratigraphic excavations from 1929 to 1931. In addition to the various studies of the stone artefacts, I was able to study the animal bones from these stratigraphic layers and to obtain radiocarbon dates from some of the bones. This provided a reasonably well-established chronology from 26500 cal BP to 13900 cal BP. Given that the stratigraphy was generally horizontal, finds could be related to the stratigraphy and the chronology. These 766 images represent the most certainly dated assemblage of Upper Palaeolithic art anywhere in Europe, and probably the most certain anywhere in the world. It is completely inappropriate for rock art scholars not to give the art from Parpalló the importance it should have.

Because we can identify the species of animals in the images (almost all Spanish Ibex, Red Deer, Horse and Aurochs), it is possible to compare the relative frequencies of different species in the art with those among the animal bones. Unfortunately, taphonomic studies suggest that the large animals were not treated in the same way as the medium sized animals either by the agencies that deposited the bones at the site, or by the excavation and analysis of them. One example of this is that the excavators observed large numbers of rabbit bones (as seen at sites excavated more recently). None were collected; none were represented in the images at the site. As a result, the only reliable comparison is one which considers the images and the bones of the Spanish Ibex and the Red Deer, but because of the possible biases among the bones, it is best to compare the ratios of these species in both cases.

The most important thing about this is that it enables us to assess the common statement that the animal bones do not correspond with the images on the walls, most obvious from the relative scarcity of reindeer images in times and places where the bones are totally dominated by that species. At Parpalló, the lower layers, before 20400 cal BP, contain about 2 deer images for every ibex image and about 7 ibex among the bones for every 2 deer. But after that date, the two ratios come together about 1.5 ibex for every deer in both images and bones. That change cannot be explained simply in terms of environmental change, and I have interpreted it as a change in the symbolic

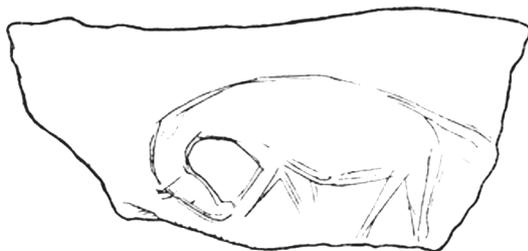
values associated with those animals. The date of the change also corresponds with the change from the Solutrean to the Magdalenian. As a result, Parpalló also seems to demonstrate as no other site does that this change is a real cultural change and not just a change of lithic and bone tools.

The relationship between symbolism and the environment changed through time, and when we return to look more closely at the relationship between images and bones, it turns out that the relationship also varied across space. Among the animal bones, I found one bone, of a horse, and I am reasonably confident that there was only one, which had an engraved picture, which was also of a horse. This suggests that, despite the availability of an alternative medium for image making that was understood and recognised at the time, there was something deliberate about using stone plaquettes for image making. This led me to consider the uniqueness of Parpalló in the context of other sites with plaquettes. Many sites have a few plaquettes with images, but only small numbers of sites have large numbers of them. I argued that this is an indication that whatever information was conveyed through the images was also restricted in access but that the associated behaviour became more widespread after 20 000 years ago.

Villaverde's study looked closely at the stylistic conventions among the images of particular species. All of these changes took place within a single tradition of iconicity, thus raising important questions about the capacity to infer anything only from stylistic similarity or difference.

Finally, the latest date for art at Parpalló is about 14 000 years ago. Radiocarbon dates for images at Le Portel and at Las Monedas – the latest direct dates for cave art – are also of that age. It seems to be the case that Upper Palaeolithic art did not survive the global warming before the Younger Dryas.

Parpalló provides evidence to establish the variation in symbolism through time, to contribute to the understanding of its variation through space, and provides fundamental information about the relationship between iconicity and symbolism.



Equids from Parpalló, ~18 000 years ago
(drawing: Pericot 1942)



Horse painting, ~24 000 years ago
(photo: Servicio de Investigación Prehistórica, Valencia)



5 cm

Bones of large and small equids (photo: I. Davidson).





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