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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



THE MIDDLE-RANGE THEORY OF “SHARED SPACE”

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Among the changes that arose from Neolithic production methods, there was a cultural shift in the perception of “time” and “space”.

The lives of prehistoric hunters were determined by their mastery of the natural environment, and security came from knowing their territory and knowing, at any given moment, the state of the fauna that they depended upon.

With the development of production economies and the spread of agriculture, people became sedentary and dependent upon seasonal cycles and good harvests for their food. Annual cycles, or time, therefore became factors that determined a successful economy.

The cultural tools that developed in each of these different spatial and temporal systems were, respectively, calendars and maps. In this context, the existence of Palaeolithic maps can be seen as a natural rather than an exceptional phenomenon. In turn, during the Neolithic, calendar, lunar, solar, and stellar systems were developed to manage seasonal changes.

Space was therefore the dimension that Palaeolithic hunters needed to know and control, and the mobility of the bands that painted the caves was greater than we might think. In fact, only extreme mobility can explain the existence of art forms showing influences from regions of France and the Iberian Peninsula that were very distant from each other.

What does the theory of “shared space” propose? Herbivorous predominance

In Palaeolithic rock art, 90% of the naturalistic representations in which an animal species can be identified are of herbivores. This includes both herbivores that were hunted and eaten, and those that were not. While this may at first seem puzzling, the predominance of images of herbivores reflected the real world. Prehistoric groups needed to survive and focused their attention on that which might provide them with sustenance. In other words, regardless of whether the represented animals were found among the faunal remains in the cave or nearby camp, and therefore regardless of whether the animal that was depicted was an animal that was hunted, it was nonetheless an animal that could potentially be hunted.

“Shared space”

Caves and nature both presented similar challenges for prehistoric groups: they were a territory to be explored, and explore them they did. These groups were nomadic in nature and equally “nomadic” in caves. They did not just stop at the entrances or in nearby chambers, and the long,

dark passages and slopes did not deter them. On the contrary, they were seasoned explorers and would paint in areas that were several miles away from the entrances. These paintings show us their “perspective” and tell us what was really important to them.

Annexe

Abbé Breuil’s encounter with God (Tale)

Abbé Breuil died and went up to heaven. Saint Peter came to greet him, and praising the many merits that he had shown during his life on Earth, he told Abbé Breuil that God would grant him a special favour: the favour of answering any one question that Abbé Breuil chose to ask Him. As they went along, Abbé Breuil mulled over what question he would like to ask God. God knew everything. So to begin with, he thought of all the great questions that had troubled him during his life on Earth: why was there war? why was there disease? Questions began to fill Abbé Breuil’s head, but as he reached the great door, he realized that there was only one question that he really wanted to ask. At the end of the day, what he really wanted to know was the truth about the great investigation that had been taking place across continents: the meaning of Palaeolithic art. Saint Peter told him that they had arrived and that Abbé Breuil should enter the room alone and once inside ask his question. Saint Peter smiled and reminded Abbé Breuil what he already knew: that God was going to answer the question that he chose to ask and that he would answer it truthfully. Abbé Breuil went into the room, and saw thousands of painting on the walls that he quickly noted were similar to human Palaeolithic art; similar to the paintings that were found in Palaeolithic caves in France and Spain. However there were more of them: it was as if this was all of the art that still existed on Earth, as well as all of the art that had been lost. He looked at the figures, the colours, and the scenes, and, of course, he looked at the ceiling and saw what he had already known deep down that he was going to see: many scenes like those at Altamira... Feeling overwhelmed, he asked his question:

“Lord, what is the meaning of Palaeolithic art?”

And God answered:

“It was already here when I arrived.”





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