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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles
SYMBOLISM AND BECOMING A HUNTER-GATHERER

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Art is the making and marking of surfaces. In 1997, I suggested that there were some hints of a common process in the late Pleistocene emergence of painting and engraving, but that the outcomes were different in different regions: marking of individuals through beads...; marking of segments of society in open social networks; marking of closed social networks through identification in a central place; marking of the manner of corporate ownership. I suggested that the relative absence of painting and engraving of all forms in the Upper Palaeolithic of the east Mediterranean region was not a coincidence, but represented a different ideology in relation to the environment; a difference related to the emergence of agriculture in the east, but not in the west, Mediterranean region. In the same volume, Bar-Yosef documented the few late Pleistocene “artistic” expressions in the Near East and argued that the scarcity was unlikely to be a product of lack of sites or of taphonomy. Rather, he suggested the reasons probably lie in the social realm. Socio-economic changes led to restructuring of social groups, because complex symbolic behaviours enhanced group cohesion and played a role in resolving conflict.

In this paper I argue that people use symbolism to work out their social relations with each other. Elsewhere in this volume, I show that using the evidence from Parpalló. We know about the way in which people worked out their symbolic relationships with their environments and with each other in much detail for the western end of the Mediterranean but we know very little about the way in which people worked out such symbolic relationships for the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

Almost all European Upper Palaeolithic paintings and engraving are earlier than the Younger Dryas (figure) but everything is different after that event in both the west Mediterranean (where painting and engraving almost disappears) and the east Mediterranean where a new painting and engraving emerges at sites such as Göbekli Tepe and Mureybit, which is complex in a variety of different ways. There is no sign of the emergence of agriculture or related practices in the western region, but it is in the context of this new symbolic environment that agriculture emerged in the east. Whatever the merits of the argument that the symbolic relationships that developed in the west Mediterranean region made it unlikely that people would move towards agriculture, the broader point of this argument is to suggest that there may be important processes operating in past human behaviour that can be understood by recognising the significance of variation in symbolic behaviour across broad geographic regions.

In order to move further in such arguments, it is necessary to have an understanding of the sorts of theoretical contexts in which visual cultures interact with human belief systems. Of many possible options, I will mention that constructed by Philippe Descola. He has associated generalisations about the production of art with the patterns of belief about physical form and cognition in naturalism (as in the Western world), Totemism (as in some Australian Aboriginal societies),
Animism (as in certain native South American tribes), and Analogism (as in some Central American peoples). Each of these ontologies (as Descola calls them) reflects in its art people’s beliefs about the relationship between humans and the rest of animate or inanimate nature. Unfortunately, it is much more difficult to infer the ontology from the traces of the art alone – the art will not allow us simply to attach a label to prehistoric ontologies. Nevertheless, the important point for this argument is that fundamental ruptures in the way in which the world is represented probably correspond to different world views. On the other hand, as I have argued elsewhere in this volume, it is also possible for there to be different world views within a single iconic tradition.