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Short articles



MYTHS AND SYMBOLS IN UPPER PALEOLITHIC ART:

the Role of Animal / Animal and Animal / Human Assemblages

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In Upper Paleolithic composite representations of animals and humans (assemblages) can we identify the components of an original symbolic system that could have continued into the later mythologies of Europe?

1. The “**animal / animal**” **assemblage** exists in two forms:

- the “*patchwork*” *assemblage*, consisting of either a composite animal or “heterogeneous, but identifiable, body segments” that are intentionally aggregated: in both art forms, 41 cases, 24 of which are Magdalenian, are from 18 sites. The binary assemblages (horse/bovid and horse/cervid) dominate on both walls and objects. Three ternary cases exist in parietal art. The support is always stone (walls, slabs), except for one possible spearthrower;
- the “*fusional assemblage*”, consisting of a more or less complete integration of two individuals of different species through a melding of anatomical parts: there are 9 cases of this in the Magdalenian, originating from 7 parietal and portable art sites. The common binary themes are horse/bovid (aurochs) and horse/cervid. The supports are all stone, except for one bone piece (a rib).

2. The **animal / human assemblage**, according to J. Clottes, results in “composite creatures [... with] morphological features that are indisputably attributable to humans and animals”. They are created by the aggregation of “heterogeneous body segments”, extracted from reality, and most often identifiable at the level of Family or Order (e.g. an animal ear or a caudal appendage) (figure).

- In **portable art**, 25 cases (14 Magdalenian) come from 14 sites. The supports are varied (ivory, reindeer antler and stone), as is their function. They include possible utilitarian objects (retoucher, spearthrower, pierced baton?), statuettes (at least 6) and lithic slabs (11). The binary themes associate humans (rarely sexed: 4 females and 2 males) with quadrupeds (herbivore or carnivore), lion, caprid, cervid, equid or *prolagus*.
- In **parietal art**, 23 cases (14 Magdalenian) come from 12 caves and rock shelters. Binary themes dominate: human/bison (8, with 4 sexed humans), human/bird (10, with at least 2 sexed humans), human/cervid (2). A more complete theme exists (at least ternary) in the cave of Les Trois-Frères where the “Sorcerer” is composed of the animal segments of at least three species (cervid, strigid, feline).

An associated conceptual arrangement lies in the integration of animal prints in the figure realized by the engraver, for example, bear claw marks integrated into the engraving of a hand.

Interpretive orientations

There are currently 98 known assemblages of this type. This theme remains rare in the inventory of sites, and most that do exist are attributed to the Magdalenian. The most common supports are stone walls and slabs. Only 8 osseous material supports have been identified. Does this indicate a desire to transmit this motif through time, or to keep it alive in the long term memory?

- In the case of the **animal / animal assemblage**, what was the mental process of dismembering and reconstructing the figure? What was the relationship between the species joined together? Does it have a symbolic meaning? Do the most common species (equid, bovid and cervid) represent stability? Are the rare species linked to a place-specific expression? The fusional horse-rupicapra assemblages found at Fontalès and Pekarna, located 2 500 to 3 000 kms from each other, show many technical and stylistic similarities. Based on these convergences, can we propose the minimum hypothesis that a myth was shared by more or less related groups, and represents a significant mental link between them?
- In the case of the **animal / human assemblage**, which species and which anatomical parts are most often adjusted to humans, according to what criteria: sex; the nature of the identified / feared animal? What are the advantages for the individual who thus absorbs the quality of the species to which he / she is linked? The anomaly of the “new creature” reveals the disappearance of the rigid boundaries between animals and humans. Is this the root of metamorphoses?



Carriot Cave (Lot): cervid (head)/humain (legs) assemblage (after Lorblanchet 2010).

Or the birth of ambivalent deified beings? What is the status of these composite anthropomorphic creatures? They are rare, difficult to see and often found in places that are difficult to access. Does this indicate that they had a religious or symbolic function?

Conclusion

These heterogeneous images inspired by the real world isolate anatomical parts of animals and humans: the bodies are dismembered into segments (always identifiable) that are then assembled to construct abstract hybrid entities that evoke other worlds. This solidarity implies a philosophical process of intentionally confusing identities, in which humans participate, and which can correspond to the archaeology of symbols. Realized by human groups that were linked through exchanges or alliances, their similarities reflect a common reference that could nonetheless be expressed with variants reflecting variability through time and space. Could the choice of these themes, mostly involving large mammals and birds, thus reveal a system of original myths – nonetheless fundamental to human thought – which were already sophisticated and expressed orally and graphically, and whose evolution we may be able to follow in later mythologies?





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