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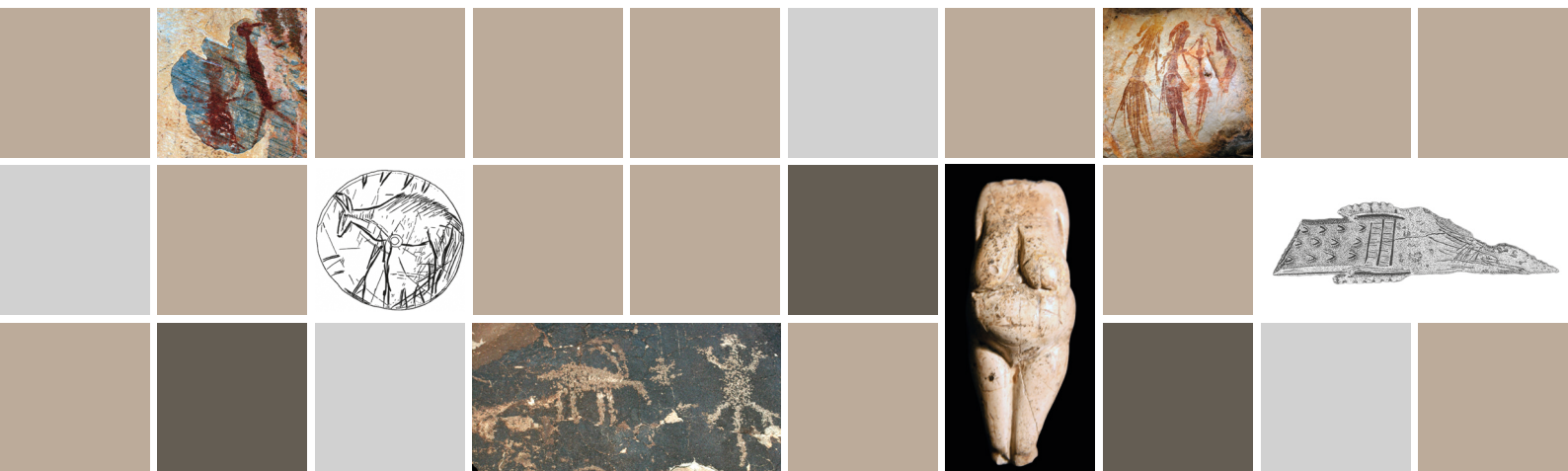
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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



FROM THE ICONOGRAPHY OF ROCK ART TO ITS ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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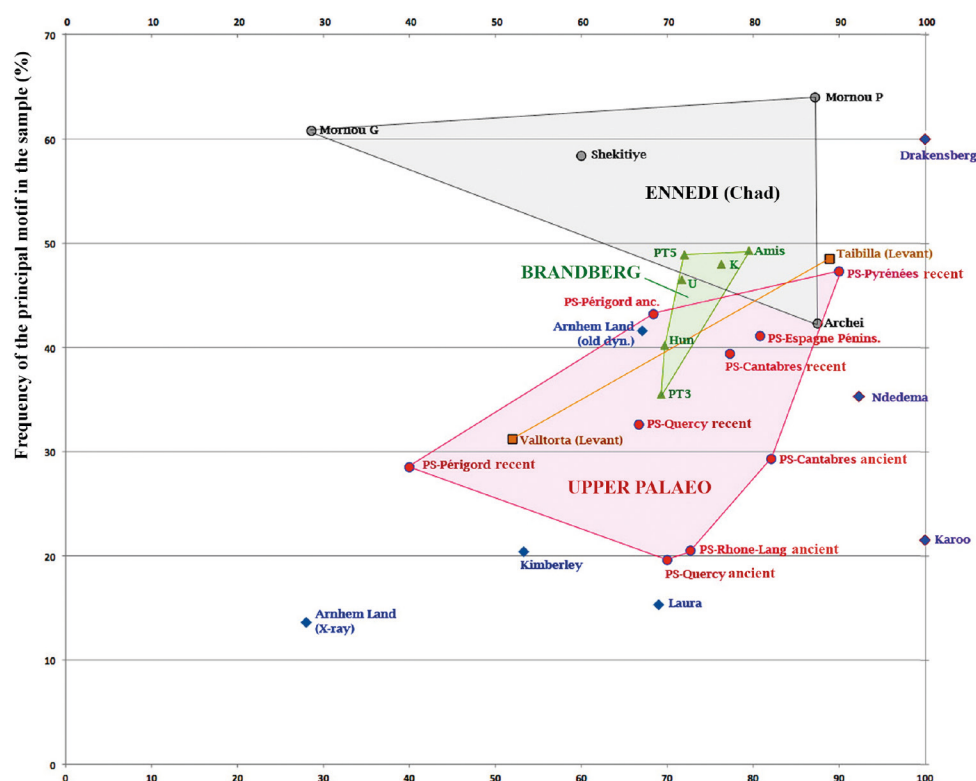
The aim of this collective study is to examine the hypothesis that the iconographic structure of rock art traditions will vary as a function of the socio-economic organisation and belief systems of the societies in which they are developed and used. To that end we have assembled, mostly through our own fieldwork, bodies of data on motifs from different continents and different periods of prehistory. These data come from Africa – Brandberg / Daureb (Namibia) and Ennedi (Chad) –, Australia (Kimberley, Arnhem Land and North Queensland), and Europe (Upper Palaeolithic and the Levantine art of Spain). All are drawn from hunter-gatherer and pastoral societies. In order to compare rock art traditions that are largely devoid of human representations with traditions in which humans predominate, we have chosen only to take account of animal representations. Because the animal world is an important source of symbol and metaphor in all living hunter-gatherer and pastoral societies, animal representations are a component of all rock art traditions.

In this study we consider two fundamental structural parameters:

1. the frequency of motifs depicting different animal species in the total corpus drawn from any case study;
2. the distribution of motifs between sites, in other words, the proportion of sites at which each motif appears.

Two forms of graphical representation are adopted. The first takes the corpus of sites from a case study and plots the frequency of all motifs as a function of their spatial distribution. We call this the complete thematic profile. An important methodological problem to consider here is the granularity of the typology adopted. If, for example, the Aborigines of Arnhem Land take care to distinguish twelve species of fish in their rock art, it would be a mistake to reduce these to the generic category “fish”. The granularity of the typology must be adapted so as to be appropriate to the features of each particular case.

The thematic profiles reveal two very different situations. In one, a large number of motifs is deployed differentially, each being represented in only a limited proportion of sites. In the other, one or two motifs predominate and are present at virtually all sites. Reference to ethnographically documented cases suggests we could equate these two extreme configurations with, respectively, totemic societies (the Kimberley case) and to societies practicing shamanism (the Drakensberg case). It is, however, unlikely that the method has predictive power, since the same observed patterns could have very different causes. Systems of belief characterised by a strongly hierarchical body of actors, active across the entire area of study, cannot universally be classified as “shamanic”, as a study of the decoration of Christian churches would yield the same configuration!



Frequency of the principal animal motif in a rock art area (% of the whole iconography) plotted as a function as its spatial distribution (% of sites in which the motif appears). Polygons represent the scattering of various regional sub-assemblages that constitute a rock art area.

A second mode of graphical representation consists of only plotting the numerically predominant motif in each case study. This method makes it possible to compare dozens of rock art traditions at a glance. It also has the advantage of demonstrating heterogeneity between different regional sub-assemblages that constitute a culturally-defined area. The archaeologist can then explore the causes of the observed heterogeneity. While it is most likely to be chronological in origin, it may also arise from contemporary regional differentiation. The differences observed between the two Levantine art regions (Valltorta-Gasulla in the north and Taibilla in the south) are no doubt of this kind. Detecting such cases of regionalization is in itself an interesting archaeological finding, although it must of course be confirmed by other analyses, particularly the examination of corresponding variation in style and techniques.

The frequency-distribution graphs also allow us to detect “anomalies” produced by the presence of sites with an unusual preponderance of a particular theme such, for example, as a site of Ennedi, containing 84% of the camel representations present in the corpus, and the case of Rouffignac, “Cave of 150 Mammoths”, in the Magdalenian of Périgord. In this latter case it is interesting to refer to the complete thematic profile for the region, which demonstrates that Périgord has the same profile as neighbouring regions, with the exception of mammoths, which is the only anomalous element in the overall configuration. Such observations are valuable aids to interpretation.

We expect that the structural analysis of rock art traditions such as are presented here will provide an important means toward the anthropological study of prehistoric societies, placing another tool at the disposal of archaeologists.



