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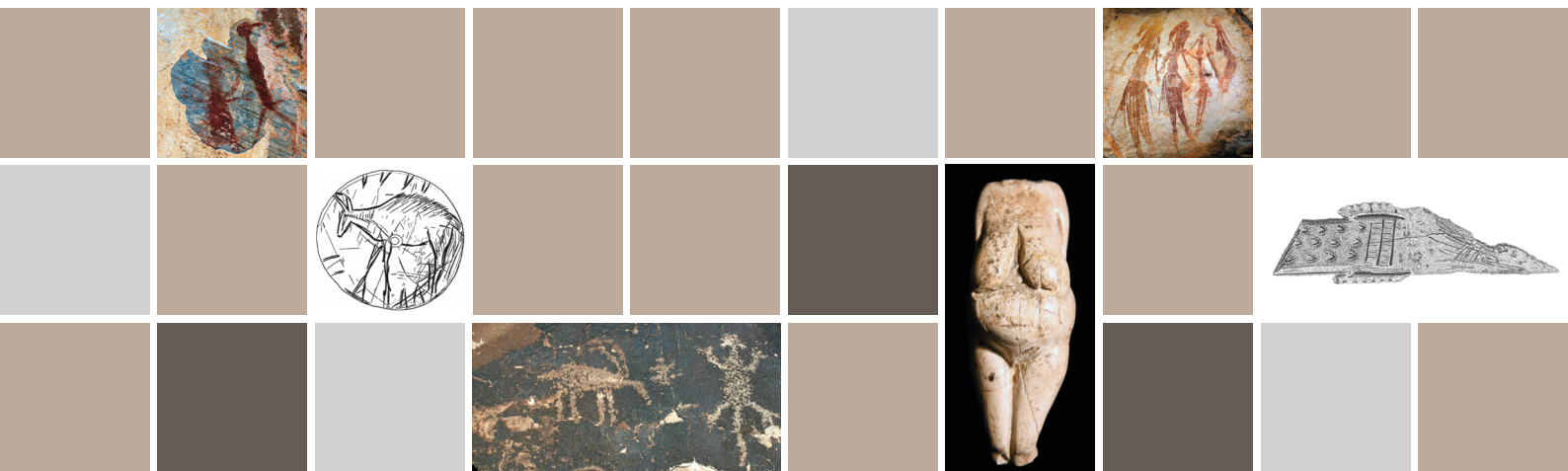
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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



PALAEOLITHIC CAVE ART IN ITALY:

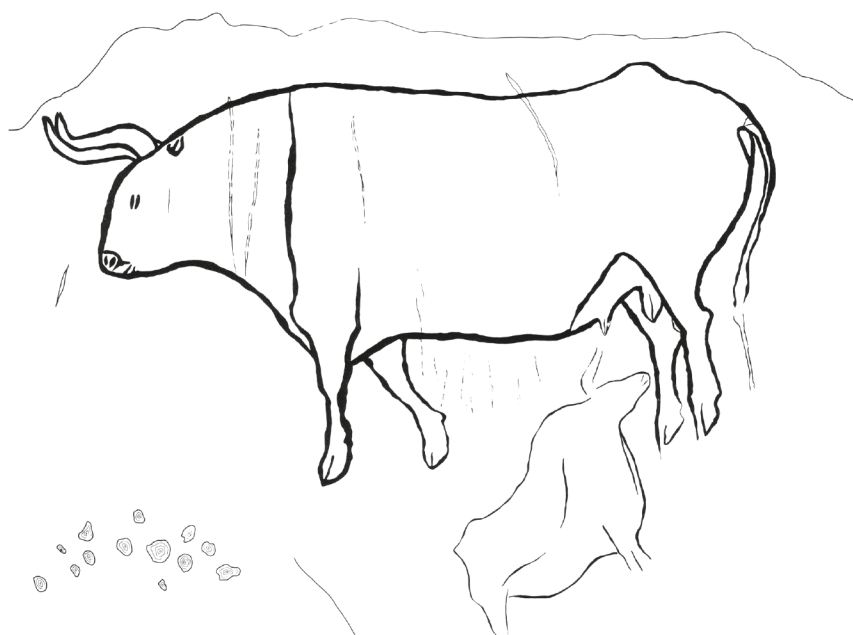
from the Iconography of Signs to the Underlying Symbols

Dario SEGLIE

In a particular moment of Man's history on our planet, the phenomenon of rock art appeared, more or less 40 000 years ago, consisting of signs inscribed on rocky surfaces, in caves, in shelters or in the open air. Their typology is vast and varied: from figurative naturalistic and descriptive signs to abstract geometric and symbolic notations.

This huge amount of signs that men have impressed on the surrounding world is not the result of an immediate transformation of *Homo Sapiens*'s intellectual activity, but is the effect of the maturation of a long cognitive process based on the psychic dimension and comporting stages leading to a more enlarged self knowledge, grounded in reflexively deepening thought associated with the knowledge of another world perceived as separate from or discontinuous with human personality.

Rock art is the vehicle of intermediation and of communication between two worlds, one transcendent, spiritual, the kingdom of the sacred and divine versus the kingdom of man, the effective world, real, tangible and concrete, where the daily drama of life unfolds.



Romito Shelter: near Papisidero in Calabria, on a boulder in the shelter, a large figure of bovid or bull is carved by a deep V line, sure and masterly delineated in a lateral profile (tracing: D. Seglie – Tere Grindatto, CeSMAp, 1974).

The universe represented by the whole complex of rock art requires pragmatic research or empirical study of the origins of the signs used and of the effects in relation to the hypothetical or conjectured behaviour that they may have provoked; our semantics is therefore the analysis of rock signs taking into account the different manners of making sense by material signs; a syntactic approach is the combinatory study between signs, over and above their specific significance and their relation to behaviour (the expressions and the gestures intended or induced).

Today rock art is a mere relict, the surviving datum of a complex cultural construction from which time and memory have erased nearly all the vital component parts; rites, sounds, songs, mimed actions, do not leave traces; oral tradition and bodily gesture don't fossilize! In the light of these considerations, landscape is not simply a portion of territory or a geographical notion, but assumes the valence of the highly spiritual building up of Humanity. In particular the ceremonies organically linked to rock 'art' cannot be seen to-day but thanks to hermeneutical horizons it is possible to plausibly (in homage to the Plato's Cave) highlight and throw into relief the silhouettes figuring on the stage of Prehistoric Man.

Palaeolithic cave art in Italy is present in various sites located in the peninsula and in the Mediterranean islands. The iconography encompasses different types of signs carved and painted on rock surfaces, usually inside dark caves and not in the open air. The signs represent naturalistic figures and geometric or abstract forms.

During the last century, and particularly after the Second World War, the evidence of prehistoric art in caves and on artefacts has increased in Italy, in particular relative to the Upper Paleolithic and to the Post-Paleolithic.

In Italy, a pioneer in the prehistoric art field was Pr. Paolo Graziosi, an archaeo-anthropologist of Florence University, supporter of the Istituto Italiano di Preistoria e Protostoria, the Italian department of the international UISPP-UNESCO. Graziosi's professor in Florence was Pr. Silvio Pons; with Giovanni Marro and Piero Barocelli, they founded CeSMAP, the Study Center and Museum of Prehistoric Art of Pinerolo, together with the Anthropological Institute at Turin University.

Since the 1950's in Italy only one cave with parietal engraved figures has been thoroughly investigated: the Romanelli Cave, near Castro in Terra d'Otranto, discovered in 1905. In the succeeding decennials further discoveries were made: the Paglicci Cave, in the Gargano Peninsula, Puglia; the Cala dei Genovesi Cave, in the Levanzo Island; the Addaura and Niscemi Caves, at Monte Pellegrino near Palermo, and minor sites in the Palermo and Trapani area (Za Minica, Dei Puntali, Racchio and Isolidda caves); the Romito Shelter in Papasidero, Calabria; the Caviglione Cave, at the Balzi Rossi in Liguria.

The caves containing parietal art, linked to the Upper Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic horizons, host mainly carved signs; only few possess paintings. In a few grottoes it was possible to connect the archaeological levels to the wall decorations. The parietal Pleistocene art in Italy constitutes an ensemble of forms presenting naturalistic, sub-naturalistic (zoomorphic and anthropomorphic) stylemes and abstract or geometric signs.

Chronologically, this important phenomenon extends over a long period of time –over 10 000 years, starting from a complete facies of the Gravettian Era dated 22 000 years BC to the end of the Epipalaeolithic, about 11 000 years ago.

