FUNCTIONS, MEANING AND SYMBOLISM OF EUROPEAN UPPER PALAEOLITHIC ANIMAL REPRESENTATIONS

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The explanation of Palaeolithic art is always a particularly difficult field of research, at the origins of numerous scientific debates: The “Art for Art” of the 19th Century scientific materialism following G. de Mortillet, the “Magic of hunting and fecundity” issued from the ethnographic comparison of S. Reinach, R. Bégouën and H. Breuil, the “Totemism” from M. Raphaël, the “Social systems” of A. Laming-Emperaire, the “Sexual dualism” of A. Leroi-Gourhan, the “Kraft und aggression” of J. Hahn and more recently the “Shamanism” of D. Lewis-Williams and J. Clottes, for the best known of these interpretations. In 2001 Liege UISPP congress, we have revisited the correlation between Palaeolithic art (styles) and Palaeolithic cultures, which had been decor-related by A. Leroi-Gourhan in 1965. Then, we have studied the correlations between zoocenoses (association of animals in their territory), taphocenoses (bone remains in the archaeological levels) and iconocenoses (bestiaries figured in mobile, rock and cave art), replaced in the context of the territory of circulation of the hunter-gatherer groups at different periods.

Several prehistorians had already pointed out the large difference between mammal species recorded in the taphocenoses and the iconocenoses of the cave art (Delporte; Sonneville-Bordes, Mourre-Romanillo). Shortly written, why they are figuring horses and bisons when they are eating reindeers? Then the association bison/horse (and the others) may only be symbolic! We have shown previously that the error of such an approach is the correlation between taphocenoses and iconocenoses at the level of the site, while the good approach is the correlation between zoocenoses and iconocenoses at the level of the territory. During the upper Palaeolithic, the climate has changed and then both the zoocenoses and the hunter territories have changed, at the origins of different iconocenoses through time and places, because human groups are figuring the mammals they see during the circulations inside their territory. If, in the Middle Europe mobile and cave art, the zoocenoses are changing rapidly defining various iconocenoses, at the opposite, in the Southern Europe (Subpyrenean and Subcantabrian Iberian peninsula), both the zoocenoses and then the iconocenoses are constant through time. Statistics using multidimensional data analysis of bestiaries figured in the European Upper Palaeolithic mobile, rock and cave art, has shown several types of iconocenoses, which are different upon the cultures.

We have identified three iconocenoses for the period 34000-21000 BP. Actual known data cannot distinguish any separation between Aurignacian and Gravettian (figure).

- Iconocenose 1, correlated with a Continental zoocenose: 60% of the iconocenose is represented by the association mammoth/rhinoceros/feline/bear (cf. the “Kraft und aggression” model of J. Hahn and the derived “not hunted and dangerous animals” model of J. Clottes).
• Iconocenose 2, correlated with an Atlantic zoocenose: more than 50% of the iconocenose is represented by the association horse / bison-aurochs / mammoth.
• Iconocenose 3, correlated with a Mediterranean zoocenose: association horse / aurochs.

The unique iconocenose of Solutrean and Badegoulian is an association horse / aurochs / deer and doe / ibex, corresponding to the flow back of human groups during the maximum ice age into the Subpyrenean and Subcantabrian area: Iberian rock art, cave arts and also rare cave art of Aquitania (Lascaux, Gabilllou, Bourdilles, Badegoule), corresponding to summer travels to the north.

The three Magdalenian iconocenoses are much more diversified, due to the progressive colonisation of the Middle Europe by Magdalenian groups from 16,000 BP.
• The iconocenose A is an association horse / bison dominating, mainly found in the northern slope of Pyrenees, Basque country and Cantabrian and Asturian coast, as in the sculptured rock-shelters of Aquitania and Charente.
• The iconocenose B is an association horse / reindeer dominating, showing two variants following the mode of migration of reindeers (down-up the valleys for B1; north-south for B2):
  – B1 from valleys of Perigord / Quercy;
  – B2, associated with mammoth / rhinoceros, from open areas of Middle Europe.
• The iconocenose C is an association horse / bison / aurochs / redder and doe dominating, corresponding to the upper Magdalenian occupation during the Bölling episode when Mediterranean faunas are coming back in Aquitania and the Rhône valley.
A very particular iconocenose is an association horse/bison and mammoth/rhinoceros, known only in four caves located near the Eyzies: Rouffignac, Font de Gaume, Combarelles I/II and Bernifal, mixing the three middle Magdalenian iconocenoses (A, B1, B2), perhaps resulting in seasonal meeting points.

The iconocenoses are revealing a characteristic association which has a chronological value, helping to date the cave art and identify mixed figurations through time, all but in the Mediterranean areas where the zoocenose is always the same through all over the Upper Palaeolithic.

The obtained results are not in opposition with the spatial analysis of figured animals of the cave art proposed by A. Leroi-Gourhan and A. Laming-Emperaire, but they are detailing them iconocenose by iconocenose and not globally due to the overrepresentation of the Magdalenian A iconocenose (horse/bison). The interpretation is also refuting the sexual dualism of A. Leroi-Gourhan by replacing it by a functional and symbolic interpretation: the cave is a symbolic image of the territory of human groups and the figured animals are the species from the zoocenoses which are seen in the territory. The geographic space of the territory is then the topographic space of the cave (for cave art), of the open area (for rock art) and of the dwelling (for mobile art).

Inside the cave, the “composition centrale” is symbolising the large open spaces: horse/bison in the Aquitaine large plain, horse/aurochs in the Mediterranean open spaces, mammoth/rhinoceros in the steppe northern areas. The “pourtours” are symbolising the animals decentred in latitude or altitude from the central area: deer/doe along the Cantabrian/Asturian coast, reindeer/deer along the valleys from mountains (Massif Central, northern Pyrenees), ibex/chamois from the rocky and mountain areas, mammoth/rhinoceros from the northern areas. The “zones de fond/diverticule/passage” are symbolising the less accessible areas, where the cave faunas are based: felines, bears, owls and others but also the humans.

The spatial distribution of mobile art sites and cave art sites, which are sharing the same iconocenose, are contributing to identify the territories of hunter-gatherer groups. The location of the art caves is often chosen at the limits of the territories or along the path of a circulation and owns a role of an identity marking for human groups. The double function of symbolisation of the territory and identity marking are present at the beginning of Palaeolithic art. The birth of art is then not the result of some new cognitive ability to make “art” but the answer to a functional need which has been declined at different levels: individual (ornaments), enlarged family (decoration of open air and rock-shelter dwellings), human groups and territory.