

THE ROCK ART OF EUROPE : PRESENT AND FUTURE STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

Art is the product of *Homo Sapiens* and it is likely that art as such reflects his specific *forma-mentis*. Probably the idea of producing it, was introduced into Europe some 35.000 years ago with the arrival of *Homo sapiens* (frequently named "*Homo sapiens sapiens*" by the school considering the Neanderthal as a lesser "*Homo sapiens*"). Several main styles have been recognized and dated. Palaeolithic paintings and engravings cover a range of ca 25.000 years. All the other types of rock art cover the last 10.000 years.

In Europe the rock art sequence is conventionally divided into two chronological cycles : the early cycle, from the period archaeologists name Upper Palaeolithic (with Mesolithic persistences) is the art of hunters; the later cycle comprises art produced by people with complex economies. Starting in Mesolithic times it continues into historical periods. This cycles division is schematizing a more complex situation but provides a useful working frame.

Different types of rock art are present in different areas and in different periods. Paintings, engravings, high-reliefs, filiform incisions, have different patterns of distribution. Rock art is currently found in three categories of sites : caves, shallow rockshelters and open-air rocks. The typology of the sites may have several implications such as their social use. Obviously narrow passages of decorated dark caves and broad open-air spaces in front of an engraved rock, make the rock art accessible to different sizes of human groups. This may provide indications on the possible social use made of rock art and on the possible events that accompanied its making and its subsequent fruition.

Rock art is an expression of human behaviour which is widespread throughout the world. Previous studies have shown that major concentrations of rock art are rather evenly distributed in all continents. Similar issues of research emerge in various parts of the World.

PALAEOLITHIC ART

European Palaeolithic cave art has been studied quite intensively in this century, and is far better known and published than many other assemblages in the world. A high percentage of the rock art specialists in the world today focus their major efforts on the study of this cycle, which in fact has become an elementary part of the Western culture. No doubt it provides precious insight into the very roots of European civilization. Some masterpieces of Franco-Cantabrian art convey to our minds of the 20th century an exceptional sense of harmony and conceptual refinement. In a world view, however, it must be kept in mind that there are other significant assemblages contemporary to the Franco-Cantabrian sites which may provide equally valuable contributions to world history and to the understanding of the early intellectual adventures of *Homo sapiens*.

In Europe the rock art of Hunters is found primarily, but not exclusively, in caves. The major concentrations are in the Franco-Cantabrian region in the southwest of France and in northern Spain. There are also sites elsewhere in France and Spain, as well as in Italy, Romania, Portugal, and as far east as the Russian Urals. In all, about 190 decorated deep caves and rock shelters from the Palaeolithic period are known in Europe, of which about 120 are in France and ca. 55 in Spain. Both engravings and paintings are present in virtually all of these sites.

The subject matter consists primarily of associations of animals and ideograms or symbols. The five main categories of the basic typology are the same as in other continents : 1. Anthropomorphic; 2. Zoomorphic; 3. Structures; huts and "topographic"; 4. Tools and objects; 5. Geometric and schematic graphemes. But quantitative proportions vary from one area to another and even from site to site.

Interestingly enough the statistical analysis shows proportional quantitative differences of relevant proportions between the subjects represented in the rock art and those of mobiliary art. In rock art the anthropomorphs are relatively rare and occupy a much more limited space on the decorated surface than the

zoomorphic figures. These are the dominant figurative subject both as number and as surface covered. Topographic and hut-like representations are rather uncommon and their interpretation is sometimes doubtful. The same can be said about the representation of tools and weapons. Geometric and abstract motifs, symbols or ideograms, are common and are frequently associated to the zoomorphic and other figures. Certain patterns are more localized than others. Major areas of concentrations of paintings, engraving or both, indicate regional trends. Determined types of figures or of stylistic features are circumscribed to specific zones. Others are found throughout Europe.

In an advanced stage of this cycle, which is identified with the Magdalenian period (16.000-10.000 B.P.), the polychrome paintings are of a very sophisticated craftsmanship. They are primarily concentrated in a rather limited area. Why? What happened just in that area and not elsewhere?

In Europe, painted dark caves are a pattern of the Upper Palaeolithic hunting societies. Special cases are those of Magoura Cave near Bielogradchik in Bulgaria, and of Badisco Cave near Lecce in Italy, where Neolithic and Chalcolithic sanctuary caves with numerous paintings of cosmological and mythical character from the 5th and 4th millennia B.C. have been brought to light. But such painted sanctuary caves in Europe are very rare in later periods.

In the western Mediterranean region, in Spain, France and Italy, in the final Palaeolithic, the Epi-Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic, the rock art of Late Hunters and Gatherers contain many schematic and symbolic graphemes. Local styles may focus on mazes, patterns of lines, dots and other marks which seem to have numerical and ideographic values. A new kind of logic and a new type of reasoning, seem to emerge from the style, the themes, the associations and the sequences.

Such horizon includes the so-called Romanellian rock art in Italy and La Cocina style rock engravings in Spain and southern France. Similar figures are found along the Mediterranean coast in Turkey, Israel, Morocco and Algeria. Painted and engraved pebbles from the Azilian culture in France are often similar in style and age.

This rock art horizon has been related to living sites and material culture, and thus can be

dated by archaeological evidence between 11.000 and 8.000 B.P. It seems to represent a particular type of way of life and economy, primarily based on the gathering of mollusks and other products of shallow water.

The same relation between the art style and such type of findings in the habitation sites is present not just in Europe, but also in North Africa and the Near East. At a later time the same patterns develop on mobiliary objects in the art of Maglemosian and Ertebolle cultures in Denmark, southern Sweden and northern Germany.

Later hunters of another kind, representing large, outlined animal figures and a limited number of standard ideograms, persisted in northern Scandinavia and have left open-air rock engravings all the way north to the Arctic Circle and beyond. Similar rock art is present in other European peripheral areas. Comparative studies indicate that persistence of archaic stylistic characters in marginal or peripheric regions is common in most periods and regions. Two trends may have played a role in the formation of these patterns. On one side ethnic groups situated in marginal areas may have remained more conservative; on the other, weaker or more conservative groups may have been pushed to the periphery.

The earliest phase of open air rock-art in the Alpine area, in Italian Valcamonica and Austrian Totes Gebirge is defined "Epi-Palaeolithic" and its style is named "Proto-camunian". It reflects the persistence of the Hunters range of subject-matter in a decadent Palaeolithic style. It shows stylistic and thematic similarities to the rock art of Hunters from Scandinavia, and to the earliest phase of rock engravings in Spanish Galicia. Interestingly enough, all the zones where this style has been reported so far appear to be peripheral or marginal.

THE LATER EUROPEAN ROCK ART

Major concentrations of later prehistoric rock art are found in the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal), southern France, the Alpine range (including France, Switzerland, Italy and Austria), in southern Italy, in the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland), and in Karelia. Substantial rock art sites are also known from Ireland, Scotland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece. This second cycle is the expression of peoples living on mixed economies and seems to have gradually

emerged while the Franco-Cantabrian art was in its last phases. It is characterized by open-air rock engravings.

Animal domestication and incipient agriculture are recorded in rock art with depictions of domestic animals, of oxen carrying the plough and of topographical depictions of fields. At the same time human beings become the main subject-matter. Following the "Proto-Camunian" style, two Neolithic styles (I and II) have been identified in the Alpine area. From then on, a parallel stylistic evolution with specific local characteristics may be followed in Mediterranean Europe and in the Northern countries. Some stylistic and thematic similarities between Valcamonica in the Italian Alps and Bohuslaan rock art, in Sweden, arise many queries.

Almost everywhere in Europe, rock art became virtually extinct with the advent of the Roman Empire, although in some areas this tradition persisted, or was renewed, in the Middle Ages. The two notable most complete stylistic sequences are in Valcamonica and in Southern Scandinavia.

In the European regions of Russia major rock art sites have been recorded in Karelia, on the shores of Lake Onega and Lake Ladoga, and along the shores of the White Sea. Scholars have reported relevant groups of rock art in the valley of the river Volga, as well as in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus. In Gobustan, near the south-wester, shores of the Caspian Sea, an exceptional succession of styles has revealed an evolution ranging almost uninterruptedly from the eighth millennium B.C. to the Middle Ages. Such a long sequence of Post-Palaeolithic rock art in Europe is equalled so far only in Valcamonica, Italy.

At the moment Valcamonica is the richest area of rock art in Europe, both quantitatively and in terms of age and the sequence of styles. A series of six major styles range through a time span of some 10.000 years, covering the entire Holocene epoch. This valley provides a documentation, produced by the direct protagonists, from the hunting clans that reached the Alpine area immediately after the melting of the Ice Age glaciers, up to the advent of the Roman Empire and beyond, with secondary persistencies until the Middle Age. The sequence begins with the Proto-Camunian style which belongs to the Epi-Palaeolithic period. Valcamonica styles I and II are Neolithic, dating back to the 6th through 4th millennium B.C.

Style III/A is from the Chalcolithic (or Copper Age), covering the 3rd millennium B.C. Styles III/B to D occur during the Bronze Age and cover the 2nd millennium B.C. Style IV/A-B start in the final Bronze Age and continue in the transition phases to the Iron Age. Style IV-C is Early Iron Age, IV-D-E are Middle Iron Age, and IV-F and Final are Late Iron Age. The Post-Camunian styles A-B-C range from Roman times to the Middle Age. From one period to the other substantial changes of style and typology have been recognized so that Valcamonica provides a rather unique sequence of styles displaying changes in subject matter and concerns.

THE TYPOLOGICAL SUCCESSION

Stylistic and typological succession show what seems to be a parallel evolution at three corners of Europe, in Valcamonica, Gobustan and Southern Scandinavia. In each area there is a sequence of periods and each period has its own peculiar features and typologic characters. The main categories of the basic typology are the same as in the Hunters sequence. Such limited list of themes in fact includes most of the rock art all over the world : 1. Anthropomorphic; 2. Zoomorphic; 3. Structures, huts, and "topographic"; 4. Tools and objects; 5. Geometric and schematic graphemes. Features which are relevant in modern art, such as landscape, portraits, flowers, still-life, are practically non-existent. But the style is different from area to area and from period to period.

The relative quantity and emphasis of the basic types change from phase to phase and from one geographical area to the other. The reasons for focusing the interest of the visual arts, from period to period, on specific items may be explained in some case, but constants are also detectable patterns and paradigms, behind local or contingent motivations. We can postulate that certain social and economic conditions have their own graphic output. When the comparative study is correctly conceived and carried on, often the graphic output allows to hypothesise the social and economic conditions.

The typology appears to be the first fundamental base of each comparative study. The quantitative typology may be reduced to quantitative charts of types and of recurring associations. It indicates the focus of interest and concern of each group and is essential for establishing patterns. To attain this purpose it is first of all necessary to isolate chronological assemblages in rock art groups having more than one phase, and analyse separately each stylistic

assemblage. Such procedure, which is so common in dealing with the succession of levels of archaeological sites is not yet commonly accepted in rock art studies.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Rock art usually includes three kinds of graphemes which have been named pictograms, ideograms and psychograms.

Pictograms (and mythograms) are figures believed to represent anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, structures and objects, or other figures, be they real or imaginary evocations. They refer to most of the depictions of the first four categories of the basic typology. In fact, from comparative studies we know that in the rock art of tribal groups such as the North American Indians or the Kalahari Bushmen, figures are often metaphores so that a bison or a bird, a snake or an antelope may have much deeper meanings. One cannot read a sentence without understanding the words.

Ideograms are repetitive and synthetic signs like those named as arrows, batonnets, zig-zags, circles and spirals, phallic and vulval signs, footprints and handprints, rayed disks, groups of dots and of lines. Their shape may provide some hints about their significance. Several of these signs have universal meanings but there may be exceptions. Their meaning is not obvious until their associations are convincingly explained in a number of cases. Ideograms, as well as psychograms, refer to the fifth category of the basic typology.

Psychograms represent neither objects nor symbols. They appear as charges of energy. In some cases they seem to express sensations like light and dark, love and hate, energy-vitality and weakness-exhaustion, life and death. Psychograms are not repetitive and each one may be unique in its particular shape. They are more frequent in paintings than in engravings, and more frequent among hunters than in other groups.

It should be noted that these three categories of graphemes are present in the visual art of every continent, all over the world, in all times. They have obvious parallels in the sonore expressions of music, in the movements of dance and probably in other expressions of art creation. They seem to reflect mechanisms of the human mind.

The typology is the grammar of rock art. Each one of the pictograms, ideograms and psychograms is like the word of a sentence. But ideograms are frequently related to pictograms and in such cases they have to be considered and understood as part of an association. Behind the grammar there is a syntax. The real challenge at present, is that of finding constants in the syntax and understand its meanings.

The kind of association varies from period to period. We may recognize three main types : simple association, composition and scene. Scenes are common in the later phases of rock art. In the art of Hunters-Gatherers they are very rare and in most groups are totally absent. Compositions with a rather complex syntax are rare in the late phases of rock art. They are common mainly in the art of Incipient Food-Producing societies, but are present also in the art of Hunters-Gatherers. Simple associations are present throughout the periods but are quantitatively more common among the Hunters-Gatherers. Apparently these three types of associations reflect three different kinds of reasoning.

ART AND LOGIC

In all the other continents, but mainly in Africa and Asia, a sequence of five major conceptual assemblages of rock art has been recognized : I. Early Hunters ; II. Food gatherers; III. Evolved Hunters; IV. Pastoralist; V. Agricultural and diversified economy groups. It would be beyond the scopes of this paper to repeat what already has been said elsewhere on the paradigms which give each one of these assemblages their universal characters (cf. E. Anati, The Origins of Art, 1990).

In Europe, all the known groups enter in one of these conceptual assemblages. Two of them however are better represented than the others : Early Hunters and Mixed Economy.

I. Early Hunters (conceptual associations of pictograms, ideograms and psychograms, no scenes, no bow and arrow) englobe the Palaeolithic art.

II. Gatherers (Schematic compositions showing concern for arithmetic). An economy relying primarily on gathering of molluscs and shallow water products, is reflected by several Mesolithic groups from Spain, France and Italy.

III. Evolved Hunters (presence of scenes, hunting with bow and arrow) are present primarily in the Levante paintings group of Spain, in the late phase of Addaura engravings in Sicily, in the engravings of Late Hunters in Gobustan.

IV. Pastoralists (focus on domesticated animals and on symbolism of graphemes) some of the later schematic rock paintings of Spain and southern France reflect a mentality of pastoralists.

V. Mixed economy (evocation of mythology. Daily life of humans and spirits). The bulk of later European rock engravings, from

Southern Scandinavia, the Alps, Gobustan, Georgia and Armenia are to be classified into the assemblage of "Agricultural and diversified economy".

These preliminary considerations may give an idea of the future potentiality of rock art studies in Europe. For over two generations efforts have been focused on survey, recording and description. Some local attempts at comparative studies have given positive results. Now the challenge becomes that of "reading" rock art. Through its comprehension new alleys open up towards a better understanding of the human mind and of the functioning of what we usually refer to as "logic".