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# EVIDENCE FOR MIDDLE PALAEOLITHIC SYMBOLIC BEHAVIOUR: A CAUTIONARY NOTE

by

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The recording and interpretation of archaeological finds and observations retrieved during the excavations of Palaeolithic sites is undoubtedly a complex task. Within the full array of uncovered items, the easiest to record are the lithics and the bones which, later, serve as the basis for cultural definition and sources for learning about subsistance strategies. More ambiguous are those artifacts, burials, stains of red ochre and particular features which do not lend themselves for sweeping interpretations. We tend to classify some or all of these traits as expressions for symbolic behaviour. We always remember that in most of the ethnographic analogies which we use either intentionaly or unconciously, there is ample evidence for symbolic behaviour as part of daily activities as well as on special occasions. Mundane events like going out for a hunt can be accompanied by symbolic gestures and oral expressions. More infrequent events such as **rites de passage** and burials are included in this category and are commonly enriched with such expressions.

It is unfortunate that as archaeologists we can only work with non perishable materials (except for rare cases, generally of Holocene age). Although not being able to interview the subjects of our research we have at least one advantage in the anthropological quest, namely, that we can observe the changes through time as they are reflected in the archaeological records.

The topic of our discussion, the transition from the Middle Palaeolithic to the Upper Palaeolithic, is one of the major transitions in prehistory which has currently gained much attention by our colleagues from the biological sciences. While other aspects are clarified in other sessions, this one is mainly concerned with the evidence for the changes in symbolic behaviour. Items of mobile art, body decorations, immoveable rock engravings or paintings and burials convey a pale impression of what might have been a richer inventory of symbolic activities. However, having no other choice we classify these into the following categories:

1) Art objects and art works such as figurines, wall paintings, rock engravings, etc.

2) The treatment of the dead (primary and secondary burials, grave offerings, etc.).

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3) Body decorations and decorated tools (engraved handles, beads, pendants, etc. as well as the use of red ochre).

By recording the frequencies of these categories through large time units the overall impression is that there is a major difference between the Middle Palaeolithic and the Upper Palaeolithic (e.g. S. BINFORD, 1968; HARROLD, 1980; CHASE and DIBBLE, 1987). Moreover, it is the latter period which is used as a scale with which we measure the older archaeological expressions. The various phenomena, such as art objects and rock paintings, even if not easily interpretable, nevertheless have their place in the above schematic classification. What is less obvious, however, are those remains or features which chronologically are attributed to the Middle Palaeolithic.

Studying the Middle Palaeolithic is not an easy task. As *Homo sapiens sapiens* we are not certain what, if at all, the biological differences are between those classified as archaic *Homo sapiens sapiens* and those classified as *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*. More important is our ignorance as to how the cultural changes which occurred during the last 40,000 years influenced our ability to understand the Middle Palaeolithic patterns of behaviour as reflected in the excavated sites. Naturally, we find that it is simpler to deal with the archaeological remains of the Upper Palaeolithic, perhaps because they resemble the residues left by groups of hunter-gatherers in the world of today.

Earlier efforts to understand the Mousterian artifactual variability in terms of cultural or functional analysis of entire assemblages led to an impass as recently testified by BINFORD (1980, p. 27): "I don't understand the Mousterian patterning". A somewhat similar approach led to the analysis of Middle Palaeolithic and Upper Palaeolithic burials under the implicit assumption of cultural continuation (S. BINFORD, 1968; HARROLD, 1980; CHASE and DIBBLE, 1987). This approach is derived from the unfounded conclusion that in every region of the Old World, Middle Palaeolithic humans were the direct antecedents of the local Upper Palaeolithic population (e.g. WOLPOFF, 1981; TRINKAUS, 1984, 1986). Others view the situation differently indicating the non-continuous biological sequence in the European world (e.g., VANDERMEERSCH, 1982; RAK, 1986). Therefore, instead of assuming what actually has to demonstrated, we better begin by looking critically into the available records. The examination of burials is essential if we are to attribute certain capacities to the Mousterian people.

## 2. MOUSTERIAN BURIALS

The archaeological literature on mortuary practices is already quite elaborate and therefore it is sufficient to repeat here the main attributes which indicate the presence of an intentional human burial. These include: (a) the presence of a grave pit and its form, (b) the number of individuals, their sex and age and the position of the corpse, (c) the sequence of burying, covering and/or reopening of the grave, (d) the presence/absence of grave offerings and (e) the situation of the grave in relationship to an occupational horizon and the site itself.

Undoubtedly it is not a simple matter to examine the literature on Middle Palaeolithic burials and to classify the available information into a meaningfull framework. Our colleagues who took the time and effort to accomplish comprehensive studies should be complemented (S. BINFORD, 1968; HARROLD, 1980). However, these summaries cannot be taken at face value. All the cases of Mousterian burials exposed in the pioneering stages of prehistoric research should be re-examined in the light of recent excavations during which more careful observations were made. By so doing (the detailed discussions of each case are not presented in this brief overview) we might obtain a clearer pattern although much "poorer" in attributes of symbolism when compared to the Upper Palaeolithic.

The total number of Mousterian burials, if scrutinized again, will include 12-14 in Europe and about 20 in Western Asia. Most skeletons were found in semi-flexed to flexed positions (HARROLD, 1980; MUSSI, this volume). The exact sex of the skeletal remains can be a problem and, thus, the proportions between males and females are possibly skewed, although the impression of HARROLD (1980) was that a preference for males is apparent.

More illuminating are the aspects of grave offerings and the relationship between the graves and their surroundings. HARROLD (1980, Table 5) refers to the presence of stone tools, animal bones and manuports in the Mousterian graves as furnishings although we are corectly warned by VANDERMEERSCH (1976) that these could have been components of the occupational layers into which the graves were dug. Given the problems of preservation of such old burials the intentional association between the non-human items in the grave's content and the deposited corpse should be clearly demonstrated and not assumed. On the basis of numerous observations made during the excavations in Qafzeh Cave and recently in Kebara (VANDERMEERSCH, 1981; BAR-YOSEF *et al.*, 1986) we consider the animal bones, lithics and unmodified stones incorporated in many Mousterian graves as components of the archaeological deposit and not as grave offerings. A similar situation is recognized in later prehistoric layers in the Levantine caves such as the Natufian burials at Hayonim (BAR-YOSEF and GOREN, 1973).

The number of definite grave furnishings is therefore very small and includes the child's burial in Qafzeh with the deer antler across its chest (VANDERMEERSCH, 1970) and Skhul V with the wild boar jaw in his hands (McCOWN in GARROD and BATE, 1937). The Teshik Tash wild goat horn cores around the burial and the stone ring around the skull in Monte Circeo are considered as natural features (MUSSI, this volume; CHASE and DIBBLE, 1987). One, of course, can see these grave furnishings as indicating a special relation with the animal world but admittedly the archaeological "message" is rather ambiguous. Cases such as the flower pollen in Shanidar IV or the brown bear remains in an adjacent structure to a Neanderthal burial in Regourdou (CHASE and DIBBLE, 1987) are considered as dubious. Thus, we end up with almost no grave offerings in Mousterian burials which possibly conveys a more accurate picture than given in some other summaries. Moreover, the "poverty" of the Middle Palaeolithic graves contradicts the situation in the Upper Palaeolithic and accentuates the difference between the two periods.

The issue of the general context of the Middle Palaeolithic graves can be demonstrated if we examine the situation in a couple of the recently excavated Levantine sites – Qafzeh and Kebara caves (VANDERMEERSCH, 1970, 1979, 1981; BAR-YOSEF, in press; SCHICK and STEKELIS, 1977; SMITH and ARENSBURG, 1977; BAR-YOSEF *et al.*, 1986; SMITH and TILLIER, in press).

The Mousterian sequence in Qafzeh is divided into two cycles: (1) The lower deposit (Layers XXIV through XVII) where all the burials were exposed, poor in lithic artifacts and contains a few hearths and rich in micro-vertebrates. (2) The upper cycle, which is condensed with many large fractured animal bones, very poor or entirely devoid of microfauns, rich in artifacts including all the debitage products and no human burials. The uppermost layers are heavily brecciated and inside the caves are leached and phosphatized. The general picture is one of a site which served as an ephemeral camp (although the proliferation of the *Mus musculus* (house mouse) and *Mastomys Batei*(African rat) indicate a more permanently occupied habitation near the cave. During this time Qafzeh served as burial grounds. When the nature of the occupation changed and the cave became repeatedly inhabited, humans were not buried anymore. Qafzeh stands a cautiounary example against the common belief that humans were always buried in their habitation sites.

Kebara cave provides a different setting for human remains. Two babies were deposited in the dumping zone which is rich in animal bones, mostly 'kitchen garbage'

(currently under detailed analysis by J.D. Speth). This area of the cave is also rich in debitage products when compared to the central zone (see MEIGNEN and BAR-YOSEF, 1988). The burial of the adult, recently discovered (BAR-YOSEF *et al.*, this volume), was revealed in the center of the cave where interstratification of hearths is most intensive. Thus one may conclude that the Kebara example indicates an intentional treatment of the adult versus the dumping of the babies as being of no significance to the society. This situation is markedly different from that of Qafzeh cave. However, whether this signifies the difference between the two human types is as yet unknown although one is tempeted to hastily offer this pattern after briefly examining the rest of the Middle Palaeolithic burials in Israel.

The other adult Neanderthal burials are those of the woman from Tabun and the man in Amud cave. The group in Skhul, considered as "Proto-Cro-magnons" are mostly organized burials of adults and children. However, in all these cases the possible disturbance by natural agencies should be taken into account and that baby burials are more vulnerable to such activities than those of older ages.

## 3. ART OBJECTS, INCISED BONES AND RED OCHRE

We are all aware that the number of items categorized as art objects are rarely found in Middle Palaeolithic sites. MARSHACK (this volume, in press; see also CHASE and DIBBLE, 1987) was able to present us with a critical overview of the known objects. Those considered as more or less of secured stratigraphic provenience include the following: the pendants from La Quina (perforated reindeer phalange and punctured fox canine), perforated bone from Pech de l'Azé, bear teeth from Sclayn, Micoquain pendants from Bockesteinschmiede, the carved oval placque from Tata and the limestone block with cupmarks from the child grave in La Ferrassie. More debatable are the several bone fragments with parallel incisions (such as the example from Pech de l'Azé) which could be the results of slicing (CHASE and DIBBLE, 1987). The relative poverty of the Middle Palaeolithic in 'art objects' when compared to the richness of the Upper Palaeolithic was stressed by every scholar who dealt with this subject.

The presence of art objects in Chatelperronian assemblages, generally thought today (following the discovery of a Neanderthal burial in St. Cesaire) to be the products of Neanderthals, is an intriguing problem. Most scholars suggest that this could be due to the contemporaneity of both modern *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals in Western Europe and mutual exchange of ideas and technologies between the two populations.

The exploitation of red ochre, pieces of which are commonly found in Mousterian sites, is often considered as an additional indicator for symbolic behaviour. Red ochre can be collected from natural exposures or produced intentionally (WRESCHNER, 1980). It can be used for painting the body, colouring objects, a substance in the process of tannig hides, as an ingredient in medecine, etc. One of the best examples for a scraped chunk of red ochre was found in the same layers which contained the burials in Qafzeh (VANDERMEERSCH, 1969).

## 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The collection of "foreign" objects by Middle Palaeolithic humans demonstrate their natural curiosity, a trait which signifies hominid behaviour since primordial times. The shaping of pieces, such as the bones or teeth, was done on exceptional occasions, perhaps by people who already differed somewhat from their kin. I concur with CHASE and DIBBLE (1987) in their interpretation of the burials as signs of care, or the presence of emotional bonds. However, again this does not seem to be a common habit although one

may interpret the many fragmentary human remains as indicating post-burial disturbances. Still, the presence of many cut marks on human bones, mostly in European contexts, possibly points to some intentional treatment, if not simple cannibalism (LE MORT, this volume). Thus, the scanty evidence, as viewed through the mirror of the Upper Palaeolithic, is equivocally explained. It seems that with a better understanding of the basic phenomena of the transition from the Middle to the Upper Palaeolithic, the rare expressions of what we classify as 'signs for symbolic behaviour' will fall in place in this evolutionary or cultural change.

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