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THE APPEARANCE OF SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION IN THE UPPER PLEISTOCENE OF THE LEVANT AS COMPARED TO WESTERN EUROPE

by

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One of the basic modern concepts about what is inherent to human nature is the idea, that symbolic expression comes through most obviously via artistic activities, such as painting, sculpturing, decoration, etc.

Thus the appearance of art and decoration in prehistoric times was recognized as a sure sign of the emergence of modern humans. This was most appropriate in the case of the Franco-Cantabrian art complex, where the Cro-Magnons took over the domain of the Neanderthal man and established a new evolutionary sequence of material and social cultures and traditions. Undoubtly, the story is not a simple one. We know now that there was some continuation between the supposedly separate two entities. There is an ongoing research to find evidence for the beginning of artistic activities, back in the Middle Palaeolithic. Still after many elaborations, corrections and contradictory evidence, the basic equation of *Homo sapiens sapiens* = insurgence of art still holds true at least for the Franco-Cantabrian region in particular and Western Europe in general.

Yet elsewhere the appearance of modern *Homo sapiens* is less spectacular, judged by the artistic expressions attributed to the local entities. Thus in Eastern Europe there is abundant evidence for symbolic expression via artistic channels (sculpturing, firing of clay figurines, use of ochre, etc.) , yet it is of a lesser intensiveness and scope than that of Western Europe (HAHN, 1972).

Undoubtly, *Homo sapiens sapiens* made its appearance in the Levant and most probably, as attested by the recent explorations in Eastern and Southern Africa, earlier than in Europe (STRINGER, 1989). Still, while the data from Africa is very meagre, it is quite safe to pronounce that in the Levant, there was no apparent shift in the pattern of symbolic expression. Actually, the evidence for the very existence of symbolic expression in both, Middle and Upper Palaeolithic is very sporadic and scanty.

If there has been any flourishing artistic activity in the Levant, it appears very late in the prehistoric sequence, with the Natufian culture, dated to 10,500-8,300 years B.C. For the first time in the Levant there are figurines, decorative objects and personal ornaments as well as decorated utensils (bone hafts and basalt mortars), record of events through notations on bone and stone etc. (PERROT, 1968; BAR-YOSEF, 1983).

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Is there any explanation for this incongruity? in Europe, late appearance of *Homo sapiens sapiens* and parallel appearance of artistic and symbolic activities, while in the Levant an early appearance of *Homo sapiens sapiens* and only scanty evidence for artistic or symbolic activities, untill much later.

A hypothesis that seems to be worth consideration is the idea that the difference in the magnitude of symbolic expression, observed at the Middle/Upper Palaeolithic transition between Western Europe and the Levant, has to do with the nature and magnitude of the transition process itself. It seems that the transition in the Levant was gradual without apparent disruptions. The human type, the basic subsistence strategies and the technological abilities did not change drastically, but evolved through time, preceding and continuing after the transition. In Western Europe, at least part of the aspects of human existence (the human type, new technologies, etc.) changed, in a relatively short time-span.

It is of interest to note that, in the Levant, a sudden change in the human existence happened during the Natufian when, for the first time we have evidence of a sedantary way of community living, similar to that would eventually characterize most of the human societies, all over the world.

Yet, there are more specific aspects of this phenomena to be explored. Detailed speculations about the general phenomenon of symbolic expression via artistic manifestations in prehistory and its first appearance means getting involved in very complicated issues. As said before, cognitive abilities, consciousness and self-awareness are pre-requisites for artistic expression. Thus there are endless debates concerning the first possible appearance of these characteristics in men. Yet to commit ourselves and indulge in speculations of this kind is a very tricky business. As an illustration for the range of exising opinions concerning the self-awareness and cognitivity in man, we can bring up on one hand the evolutionary theory of JERISON (1973) that endows the whole primate family with cognitive capabilities as inherent characteristics of the family and its species; on the other hand there is the extreme attitude represented by JAYNES (1976) that aknowledges the existence of what we consider human cognitive abilities only after the 3rd millenium B.C.

Under these circumstances it seems preferable to deal with specific aspects of prehistoric art instead of trying to encompass the whole general phenomena. One of the characteristics is the appearance of quantitative and repetative artistic manifestations in certain Upper Palaeolithic cultures of Europe. When encountering artistic manifestations (sporadic or repetative) we usually ask what does it mean or what is it for? I would like to confine myself to the more external, functionalistic aspect of these questions as opposed to the in-depth research and studies of prehistoric art and its meaning by such scholars as LEROI-GOURHAN (1965, 1983) and MARSHACK (1972, 1985).

The functional approach, even if not providing explanations for all of the aspects involved, explains the context and magnitude of the artistic manifestations. Using an example given by LEWIS-WILLIAMS (1984): the artist who produces religious relicts in Lourdes – it is difficult to know his motivations as an individual in choosing this vocaton, yet we can understand that part which is the culturally controlled meaning of his creations. In prehistoric research this functionalistic problem is approched mostly through processing the archaeological data, trying to isolate and locate the unique features of those cultures (i.e., those having quantitative artistic manifestations). A later stage usually involves comparing with and producing ethnographic analogies, being aware all the time that "analogical reasoning is peculiarly liable to yield false conclusions from true permises" (LEWIS-WILLIAMS and LOUBSER, 1986).

Thus the art of Upper Palaeolithic cultures in Southwestern France is explained through their specific requirements under unique local conditions for communications via open networks, needed for the widely spread tribal societies. These views were expressed

by BAHN (1977), JOCHIM (1983) (even though they differ in the detailed treatment of the subject), and more specifically by GAMBLE (1982). Another explanation links quantitative artistic expression with the existence of aggregation/dispersion sites pattern and partial sedentism – attained through specific and unique economic conditions in the same region (CONKEY, 1980, 1983, 1985; JOCHIM, 1983; MELLARS, 1985).

Under those circumstances, the artistic manifestations are explained as means to relieve and cope with social stress, stemming from the enlarged size of a group – "scalar stress" (JOHNSON, 1982, 1983). This tension in relationships characterizes social interaction among an aggragate of people confined to a specific locality for a relatively long time span. As inferred from ethnographic studies, the artistic manifestations and the symbolic ideology they represent serve to harmonize the relationships of the human group by giving it a common purpose, an identical ideological (= religious) background and is productive in solidifying a social identify all of its own (HODDER, 1979, 1982; LEWIS-WILLIAMS, 1982, 1984; LEONE, 1982).

Conversly, there is a total separation between the physical human type, his cognitive abilities and the presence of quantitative artistic manifestations. It seems that this line of speculative explanations can be followed, trying to understand why even though *Homo sapiens sapiens* appeared quite early in the Near East, quantitative art manifestations are found only at the end of the European Upper Palaeolithic (10,000–8,000 B.C.) in the Natufian culture (BAR-YOSEF, 1983). Moreover, while in Southwestern France, the artistic manifestations themselves are sometimes used as an indicator for the existence of social (or "scalar") stress, in the Natufian culture there are other indications for its existence. We have at least partial sedantism, supported by the presence of human commensals, such as the house mouse and the sparrow (TCHERNOV, 1984). There are also architectural remains that imply long-term occupations of human groups numbering up to 35-40 persons (PERROT, 1968). It is of interest to note that the conditions described by JOCHIM (1983) as necessary for the appearance of quantitative artistic expression (or borrowing a biological term, the "preadaptation" characteristics) in the Franco-Cantabrian region during the Upper Palaeolithic fit the Natufian situation in the Levant during the Epi-Palaeolithic times (BAR-YOSEF and BELFER-COHEN, forthcoming). Finally, there are quite a number of ethnographic examples where under similar conditions there are always quantitative artistic manifestations (JOHNSON, 1983; COHEN, 1985).

SUMMARY

It seems that artistic quantitative manifestations are a social reaction to processes taking place in human interactions. They are also productive for strengthening the uniqueness and unity of semi-sedentary groups, insolating them from other groups – their neighbours and perhaps competitors (HODDER, 1982; WOBST, 1977).

All this has nothing to do with proving mental capabilities. It enables us to do away with the "anomaly" of *Homo sapiens sapiens* appearance in Europe, together with consistant artistic manifestations, while in the Near East where *Homo sapiens sapiens* appeared earlier, art was quite a late arrival.

Consequently, we can grant the Neanderthals (or Mousterian) men with their ingenious lithic technology the option of being able to produce artistic manifestations (and we do have sporadic examples from Europe and the Levant). It is quite possible that there were not simply circumstances that required intensive art production to begin with.

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