



THE ART OF ESCOURAL CAVE

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ABSTRACT - Discovered in 1963, the Escoural cave in Portugal is a precious heritage in the general framework of Paleolithic art and is the western most European cave with paintings and rock engravings. The cave walls served to support the imagination of hunter-gatherer communities, who left images of their world view in paintings and engravings, and it was possibly an art of magic-religious nature (Lewis-Williams 2002).

We realize that after the Upper Paleolithic, the cognitive equipment of our species demonstrated previously inaccessible capacities: abstract thought, or the ability to act with reference to abstract concepts, not limited by time and space, the ability to plan and formulate strategies based on past experiences, and act in a group context; developing innovative technological and economic behavior, associated with symbolic behavior and the ability to represent objects, beings and abstract symbols; demonstrating a neurological and social consciousness (Lewis-Williams 2002, pp. 96-97). The explanatory and emotional components of religion, art and other human creation lead many researchers to focus on the neurobiological processes.

RIASSUNTO - Scoperta nel 1963, la grotta di Escoural, in Portogallo, rappresenta un prezioso patrimonio all'interno del contesto generale dell'arte paleolitica. Si tratta della grotta con pitture ed incisioni rupestri più ad ovest in Europa. Le pareti della cavità hanno servito da supporto per l'immaginario delle comunità di cacciatori-raccoglitori, che lasciarono allora immagini della loro "visione del mondo" nelle pitture e incisioni. Si tratta inoltre di un'espressione artistica di probabile natura magico-religiosa (Lewis-Williams, 2002).

Possiamo comprendere come, dopo il Paleolitico superiore, l'apparato cognitivo della nostra specie dimostrò capacità precedentemente inaccessibili: il pensiero astratto, o l'abilità di agire facendo riferimento a concetti astratti, non limitati da spazio e tempo, l'abilità nel pianificare e formulare strategie basate sulle esperienze precedenti, e di agire nel contesto di un gruppo.

Lo sviluppo di una tecnologia innovativa e di comportamenti economici, associati al comportamento simbolico e all'abilità di rappresentare oggetti, esseri viventi e simboli astratti, dimostra una forma di consapevolezza neurologica e sociale (Lewis-Williams, 2002: 96-97). Le componenti esplicative ed emotive della religione, dell'arte e di altre creazioni umane spingono molti ricercatori a focalizzare al loro attenzione sui processi neuro-biologici.

INTRODUCTION

The first occupation dates back to the Middle Paleolithic (50,000 BC), connected with groups of hunter-gatherers belonging to the species of Neanderthals, who used the cave as a shelter and possibly as a logistical base to support their primary activity, hunting large mammals. Archeological remains were found in the presence of carved stone tools, which were associated with faunal remains, such as those of an uroch, deer, or horse.

During the Upper Paleolithic (35000-8000 BC) the cave was used as a rock art sanctuary, for the first *Homo sapiens*. The walls of the large entrance room were used to carry out artistic motifs, which serve to preserve what we designate as places of memory of indigenous communities. It is the expression of the first art of humanity. In what may be regarded as a world view centred on the representation of animals, here it is mostly equine and bovine, with various signs of complex interpretation.

The Escoural cave is the western most of the sanctuaries with Paleolithic art in Europe, with characteristics that in some points converge with what Baptista found in the region of Foz Côa, a large outdoor sanctuary (Baptista 1999). During the Upper Paleolithic, the cave served as a sacred space for groups of an anatomically modern human type. The cave walls were used to support the imagination of the communities of hunter-ga-

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therers, who then left images in paintings and engravings, and it was probably an art of magic-religious nature (Coimbra 2008).

The route from the outside to the inside of the cave, known by some Paleolithic men for millennia, is arguably the dichotomy between two worlds; open space and light and the dark space, closed and quiet. Here there occurred socio-religious practices that maybe considered to in some degree as a way of interaction sought with the transcendent, of artistic manifestations, in which paintings and engravings are the last witnesses.

It was in the Neolithic period (5000-3000 BC) that the cave was transformed into a grave yard for the communities of farmers and pastoralists in the region. The bodies were deposited inside the cave's surface, accompanied by several votive artifacts that despite being used in everyday life acquire at the moment of death a new symbolism, in an obvious respect for the world view that Paleolithic hunters left imprinted in the cave.

The Neolithic communities, in evident contrast with the one that was the paradigm of Paleolithic hunters, made outside its symbolic space.

Ritualization proceeded in the outer space, and larges labs on the top of the hill where the cave is located were lavishly engraved with schematic motifs and stylized representations of animals. It is the sacralization of space with an ancestral tradition, respecting the departed, which protects the living. In the Copper Age resident populations built a fortified settlement and the monument that would be the depository of their dead. This funerary monument, called the *tholos* of Escoural, is located about 600 m from the cave and the fortified settlement. The archeological remains identified there reconstitute human behavior, in all its various aspects and interpretative models, based on the technology used livelihood, death and spirituality.

As for the timeline, comparisons of a thematic nature and similar technical and stylistic contexts allow us to assign most of this area to the early stages of the Upper Paleolithic, between the Aurignacian and Solutrean (30000-16500 BC), while some not figurative motifs may be Magdalenian (16000-10000 BC). Morphologically the cave consists of 30 galleries and many rooms and corridors, arranged on several levels. The representation of the engravings and paintings is divided into two groups, one consisting of zoomorphic motifs, mainly horses and oxen, and another of abstract geometric signs.

We know that all Paleolithic art uses a relatively narrow chromatic range. We note here that artists used mainly black pigment for horses and oxen, while red was mostly used for the compositions of signs and lines. A broad, firm and secure dash delineates the various engravings, with some occurrences of filiforms.

The rock art of *Homo sapiens* populations is the mirror of their mind and spirit and is a valuable record of the psychological and conceptual matrix in which it was developed. Populations, whose livelihoods depended on hunting and gathering, are almost extinct today, and the ones that resist are confined to inhospitable parts of the planet. However, many aspects of human behavior continue to reveal characteristics acquired by our ancestors.

According to Anati, "The fundamental processes of association and logic developed during the eras in which the human species has acquired its basic behavioral patterns (Postulate EA1)" (Anati 2010, p. 29). Art as something that is inherent in man has been present since *Homo sapiens* appeared and symbolic representations emerged in an artistic format. It is a process that cannot be analyzed by determinism, but rather responds to a creative appeal, which can be spiritual, aesthetic, symbolic or of another nature and that in a certain level transcends the human condition itself. Wherever man arrived, he brought with him his tradition, his beliefs, his knowledge, his habits and his culture. Wherever *Homo sapiens* arrived, he produced art and in particular rock art. Early art has a universal character all over the world: the same themes and the same kinds of associations, therefore the same grammar and the same syntax. This implies the presence of basic universally common capacities of analysis, synthesis and abstraction. The visual language is an essential conceptual component of rock art, but the art has also other components of aesthetic and emotional value. These components imply a complex capacity of association, receptive and communicative, that as far as we know is exclusive to human behavior.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The art arises and shows our human characteristics, when it is created or when it is known. One as the other helps us to find out other perspectives about the world. The work of art survives from the time when it was created and continues to transmit messages and emotions. We think that for the most part of prehistoric works of art, as those of the tribal world, where made of no durable material such as wood, animals skins, leaves of plants, trees, sand drawings, and so on.

Clottes and Lorblanchet (1995) opt for an approach that denies the concept of style at the expense of an ethno cultural concept, with a deep religious meaning, where the occult, mysterious and ritual blend in the sanctuary cave with shamanic and totemic propitiatory magic for hunting and fertility. According to David Lewis-Williams, the neurological psychological human model, or the functioning of the central nervous sy-

stem, is shaped by cultural circumstances, experiences and altered states of consciousness. He concluded that after having conducted extensive studies with the San of South Africa (Lewis-Williams, 2002, pp.136) and the population of the Mojave Desert (Lewis-Williams, 2002, p.163).

This contradicts the concept of sanctuary of structuralists like Annette Laming-Emperaire or Leroi-Gourhan, who stated that the artists had an ideal scheme, drawing animal sand signs following a program. It is the very rock which in many cases determines the composition. The detailed profiles recalling natural animals evidence a different intent, since the cave reveals the representation of a particular animal (Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 2007, pp. 52-53).

The so-called causal operator, the inferior parietal lobule, and its interconnections, generate concepts such as gods, spirits, etc., and the pragmatic components of religion are closely linked to this, or to altered states of consciousness that verify the existence of spiritual entities and may arise from diverse stimuli or privation. The essential elements of religion are thus wired in the brain. The cultural contexts may decrease the effect, but they are always operational. That is perhaps why Andrew Newberg said in his provocative phrase 'That's why God will not go away' (Lewis-Williams, 2002, pp. 290-297).

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Fig. 1-Three heads of horses (photograph from M. Ribeiro)

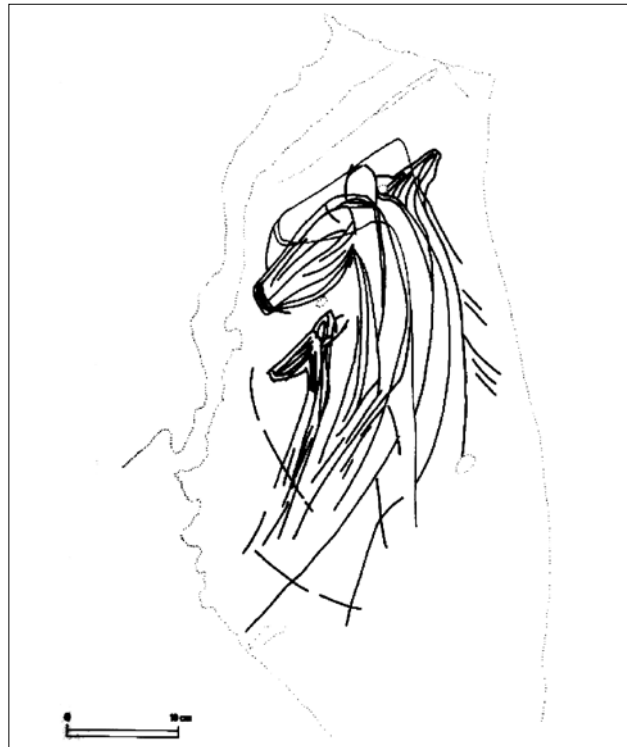


Fig.2-Three heads of horses (tracing from M. Varela Gomes)



Fig. 3-Horse Head (photography from M. Varela Gomes)

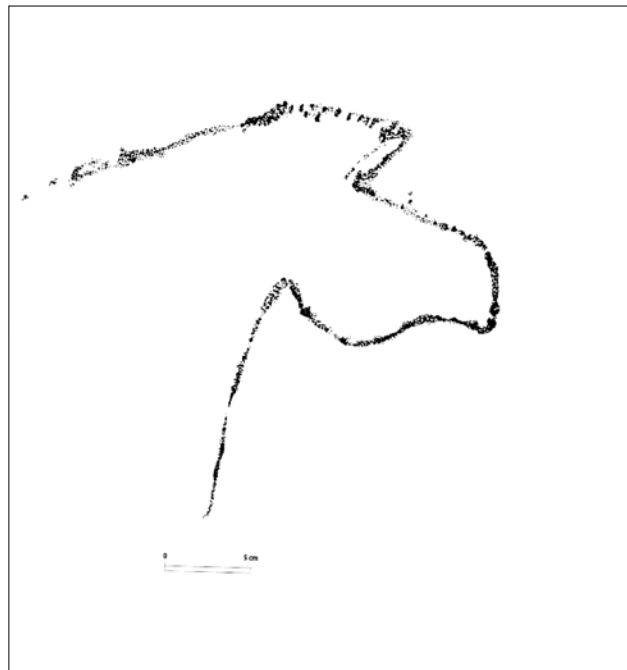


Fig.4-Horse Head (tracing from M. Varela Gomes)