

## SOME REMARKS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF CAVE SANCTUARIES

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During the first half of our century scholars like Henri Breuil, Hugo Obermaier, Paolo Graziosi and many others considered caves as holy places, which have been visited during years, decades, centuries or even millennia by palaeolithic people to perform their rites. Engravings, drawings and paintings accumulated one by one during a shorter or longer space of time. The different elements one finds in a cave have been considered by the first generation of scientists to be more or less independent from each other.

Since the sixties A. Laming-Emperaire and A. Leroi-Gourhan proposed another interpretation of cave sanctuaries. Both studied the distribution of signs and animals in the different parts of caves and analysed the combinations of different species drawn on wall segments or panels. Both authors came to the conclusion, that nothing in a cave came to be by sheer chance. Each animal, each sign has a special meaning and a predetermined position. Furthermore Laming-Emperaire and Leroi-Gourhan have been convinced, that the different animals represent not only their species in themselves, but they are at the same time symbols of a coherent religious system. Irrespective of their genus and their sex, bisons and horses are male and female elements. Curiously both authors achieved contrary results by the same statistical or better pseudo-statistical methods. What Laming-Emperaire thinks male, Leroi-Gourhan considers as female and vice versa.

The authority of Leroi-Gourhan and the revolutionary character of his theses caused modern research on cave art to follow this modernism in a very uncritical way. D. Vialou writes in his book: "L'art des grottes en Ariège magdalénienne" 1986, p.416: "Analysed in their totality, the caves appear like a symbolic construction putting together diverse materials (themes) according to appropriate arrangements (thematical connections) extremely variable, even inside of parietal dispositions undoubtedly homogeneous (for their origins or their cultural roots)."

"The comparative analysis of the symbolical constructions shows that the more elaborated and complex they are, the less we find common elements of closely comparable elements at the level of the symbolical connections."

"In a word, the analysis leads to identify and to define a diversification of symbolical constructions, proving the cultural affirmation of the ethnic sedentary groups, around their subterranean sanctuary, in a regional atmosphere endowed with a good cultural cohesion during a time (1 to 2 millenaries) relatively short compared with the parietal palaeolithic creation."

Such statistical analyses of whole contents of cave sanctuaries exclude the factor of time. They take it for granted in silence, that all pictures and signs have been created during a more or less short space of time. But in my opinion, it makes no sense to analyse a cave sanctuary statistically, if the different elements of a complex "message" have been drawn in far distant epoches. We cannot expect, that the first artists prepared a message, which would be completed only centuries later.

The "Salon noir" of the Pyrenean cave of Niaux (Dep. Ariège, France) may serve us as an example that even panels looking at first sight very homogeneous, grew perhaps slowly and little by little. Technically the panels of Niaux look uniform. All animals: bison, horse, ibex etc. are black drawings. There are no multicoloured paintings or paintings outlined by engravings like that known from Altamira or Font-de-Gaume etc. All of them represent the typical Pyrenean style of cave art. But an exact analysis of styles reveals nevertheless remarkable differences. Some drawings of horse and ibex could also be described as paintings, although they are drawn by single black strokes. Most animals have a hatched outline, but some at the right end of the main frieze have been outlined by a single firm line without any hatchings. The shapes of the bisons of Niaux show great differences. One is very mighty with an impressive mane and a strong boss above his shoulder. Others are much more slender. They have a steep face and smaller manes and bosses, than the first mentioned bison. A third group is characterized by a backline, which describes a low arch from the nose to the



tail. As some bisons are shown as male, this differences are not be caused by sexual dimorphism. Artists must have had diverging models. Some look like modern American bison, others much more like the European or Caucasian bison. Perhaps some represent the ice-age bison *priscus*, the others the postglacial bison *bonasus*, which may have occupied Europe during late glacial times. The differences of style are not so prominent, that the pictures could not have been drawn by only one man during his lifetime, provided that the two races lived together at the north border of the Pyrenees. But it seems, if did not happen like that. Rather the Salon noir was a sanctuary during a period when pleistocene fauna changed. The different types of bison described above can be observed in different, far distant caves like Altamira, Font-de-Gaume and others. At the famous ceiling of Altamira there are also very heavy animals, slender ones and such with a low-curved backline. One of the latter is normally considered as wild boar, although it depicts a bison, painted in the typical Altamira style with red and black colours. The other example has been drawn in a style not so different from that of Niaux. It looks like a later addition to the great panel. The same observations can be made at Font-de-Gaume (Dep. Dordogne, France), even though there are only paintings and no drawings. The reason might be, that at a certain time the cave of Les Combarelles replaced Font-de-Gaume as the main sanctuary in the region.

There are many different reasons to assume, that the heavy type characterized by a high, undulated backline lived considerably earlier than the lighter, slender type. The former is well dated to Magdalénien III by a relief from Angles-sur-l'Anglin and to a lesser degree by the engravings of La Marche, the latter by numerous examples of mobile art of Magdalénien IV-VI. Naturally the development of art and animals does not coincident exactly with that of material equipment. Excavated, well dated mobile art only provides fixpoints during the continuous development of Magdalénian rock art. What is important for our task is the fact, that we observe different phenomena at Niaux' panels. This fact suggests, that they are not so homogeneous as one would think at first sight, and that the panels grew slowly step by step. This observation today seems confirmed by 14 C-



datings of charcoal used by the palaeolithic painters. In fact, our older type has been dated about one millennium before the younger one. If there are such large gaps between the first and the last drawings, a statistical analysis makes no sense for the interpretation of the "message" of the panels. It provides only a conclusion *ex posteriori*, which has nothing to do with the situation of the time.

A few years ago, at Siega Verde in the Spanish province of Salamanca an open-air sanctuary of upper Magdalenian time has been discovered. At the left side of a small river north of Ciudad Rodrigo a group of rocks stands out from the soil over a distance of some hundreds of meters. The protected flanks of these rocks show pecked outlines of horses, bovines and deer drawn exactly in the style of Cantabrian cave art. If you want, Siega Verde is a sort of "cave sanctuary", but without a roof. It takes the place of them in an area which does not own any caves. The position of the engravings is clearly dictated by the nature of the rocks. One could treat Siega Verde statistically like a cave, but for my opinion it makes no sense, especially as there are several phases of middle and upper Magdalenian rock art present.

In my opinion statistical analysis like that of Leroi-Gourhan, Vialou and others are the wrong way to gain the "message" of cave art, nevertheless they came into fashion and are everywhere used quite uncritically. I think, we must first create a firm chronological basis and study the development of every cave sanctuary. Only then we can create an interpretation of cave art.