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STUDI CAMUNI

A series of monographs on art, archaeology and history

Directed and Edited by

Emmanuel Anati



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WORLD ROCK ART THE PRIMORDIAL LANGUAGE

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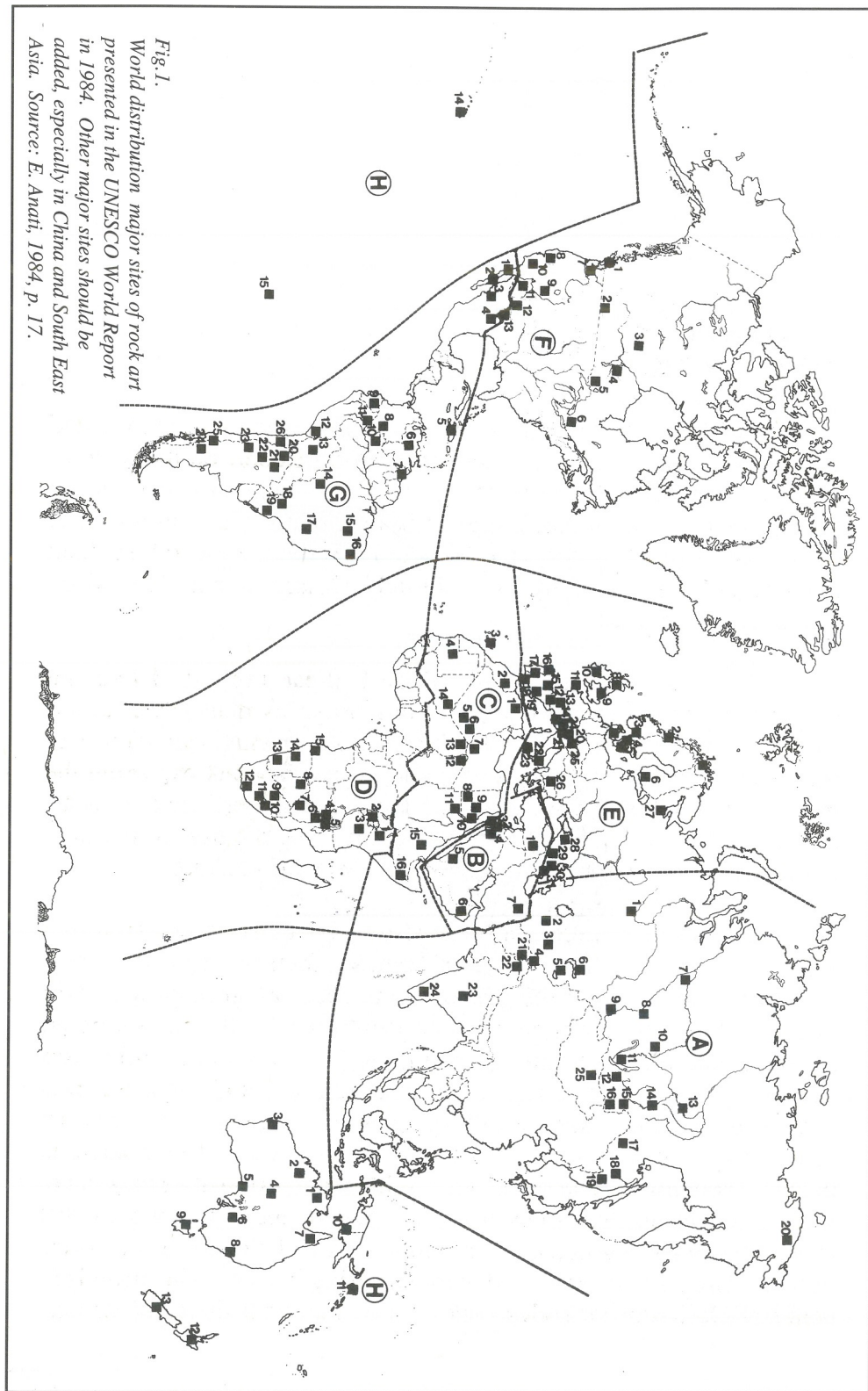
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INTRODUCTION

In 1983, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) commissioned a World Report on the State of Research in Rock Art, the paintings and engravings in caves and on rock surfaces. It was the first attempt at a world view on the most ancient art. After 10 years, in 1993 another State of Research in Rock Art was commissioned by the ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites).

Having been the author of both these reports, I had the opportunity of assessing the enormous progress made by rock art studies in the last decade. This book presents the main evaluations and messages of the two world reports; and it goes beyond, exploring the meaning of symbols, identifying the main types of syntaxes in rock art and looking at the future, analyzing what may be the uses of research in rock art and how rock art is contributing to world culture.

From one generation to another, the focus of research had shifted. At the beginning of the 20th century, after having established, in a rather vague way, the age of some rock art groups, the main interest of researchers had been concentrated on the motivations. Hunting magic, shamanism, picture writing for communication purposes, initiation, tutoring, worship of animals and other theories had been advocated and defended. Then came a period in rock art research that was characterized by uses and abuses of comparisons between prehistoric and tribal art. With much curiosity researchers were discovering that tribes from one part of the world would still represent something depicted in another part of the world centuries before. Then for over two decades, dating became the principal concern. Definition of styles took over as the main theme of debate.

Some researchers displayed their acrobatic abilities in "defining" ages, styles and sub-phases. All these issues were seen mostly at local levels. Comparisons between rock art expressions from different continents were often defined as a non-scientific approach.

In the 60's and the 70's the major trend tended to identify "scientific" with "technical" and the literature was subjected to an endless series of measures, details on recording of specific sites and other issues which are today seen as means of research rather than its goals.

Research was still conducted in a rather geocentric way. Most of the studies concerned restricted geographical areas. Phenomenology was hardly considered and then just by singling out isolated details. Most researchers had only local data at their disposal and the possibilities of finding out universal patterns was extremely limited. All these studies however were necessary steps and constitute the base of present research.

When the first "World Report" was compiled in 1982-83 the first world data bank on rock art was being established and the main issue was to demonstrate that rock art is a world wide phenomenon, a way of expression as well as a cultural trend of pre-literate people. In the second World Report, in 1993, the focus was on the presence of constants, archetypes and universal paradigms.

A number of recurring elements, present in all continents, indicate that the basic grammar and syntax of rock art respond to universal patterns of cognition, logic and communication. Rock art appears as the expression of a primordial language, with different dialects, which can be read disregarding the modern language in which one thinks and communicates. It takes us back to a universal language which, once deciphered, can be read and understood in any spoken and written language.

The archetypes are still functioning and they convey immediate and deep messages. This is the kind of language that many artists, teachers, politicians, publicity people, public relations agents and prophets would like to master. No wonder that it awakens so much interest in the general public as well.

The painted caves of Lascaux in France, and Altamira in Spain, are well known to the public because of their geographic location and their inclusion in art history textbooks. The rock paintings of the Tassili in the Algerian Sahara, and the rock engravings of Valcamonica (Camonica Valley) in the Italian Alps, have been recorded and studied for decades. Only recently have they become part of the general culture. Less known is that these sites represent only a small fraction of the world's heritage of rock art. Recent discoveries show, in many parts of the world, that early man chose to depict and engrave on rock surfaces. Although exploration has by no means been exhaustive, rock art is reported from thousands of sites. Scientific evidence, such as Carbon-14 dating, palaeoclimatic data and archaeological analysis, indicate that the oldest rock art known today was executed ca. 40,000 years ago.

Rock art reveals the human capacities of abstraction, synthesis and idealization. It describes economic and social activities, ideas, beliefs and practices and provides unique insight into the intellectual life and cultural patterns of man. Long before the invention of writing, rock art recorded the most ancient testimony of the human imaginative and artistic creativity. It constitutes one of the most significant aspects of the common heritage of humanity.

The analysis of rock art on a world scale is a new field of research and it is at its beginning. The present study is based on data collected from over 200 major rock art areas located on all inhabited continents. Some general trends and a number of working hypotheses have emerged which are summarized in 17 postulates. Rock art is subdivided into four categories which show different elements of style and content and refer to four different socio-economic backgrounds. Universal characters are identified by the comparative analysis of large concentrations of rock art around the world.

The presence of a basic grammar and a syntax in the visual art of non-literate societies indicates widespread patterns and illustrates the presence of a human "basic logic" and of universal conceptual processes of sequences and associations. Paradigms and archetypes in the visual arts are sorted and illustrated and a preliminary world vision of the phenomenon of rock art is attempted. Some of the universal patterns still survive in contemporary art.

This endowment is rapidly deteriorating due to such processes as deforestation, pollution, urban growth and the spread of roads and development areas. Vandalism and other human actions are by far the major cause of degradation. Most of this heritage has not yet been recorded or studied, and humanity risks losing it forever. It has become urgent to operate for the recording, inventory and salvage of whatever may still be preserved for future generations.

The first step towards a broad participation is awareness. How can an intelligent person wish to protect a patrimony without being aware of its value? At the 10th International Symposium on Rock Art which took place in Valcamonica (Camonica Valley) Italy, in 1992, an appeal was addressed to governments and International Organizations to promote the understanding of rock art, to develop educational programs on its preservation and on its cultural value; and to make its messages accessible, especially to the indigenous people in whose territories rock art is found.

Obviously, rock art may become a very valuable source of touristic and economic development. When such developments take place without an appropriate cultural and educational background, two major risks occur. The local population may be left aside, alienated from participation and uninspired to protect sites; inappropriate measures of protection may cause rapid deterioration of the rock art sites and of their environment. Enforcement of bureaucratic regulations can hardly replace the awareness and the concern of the people. As we have seen in Europe, in Australia and elsewhere, the patrimony of rock art can best be preserved if both the local population and the visitors seriously care for the sites.