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With the back to the art. Context of Pleistocene cave art



All research into the views of prehistoric hunter-gatherers concerning the relation of cult and space is a real challenge as it has to overcome methodological obstacles if it does not want to end up with truisms. At first glance, prehistoric cave art seems to provide information on the relation of cult and space and this led to the practice especially in popular literature to label such caves *Kulthöhle* (cult cave, e.g. Kusch and Kusch, 2001). However, if looking closer at the writings about cave art it becomes evident that the epistemological process which transformed caves with rock art into *Kulthöhlen* is based in the history of research only. The common distinction between prehistoric *grotte-sanctuaire* and *grotte-habitat* is a result of this process by which, generally, caves with rock art are subsumed under *grotte-sanctuaire*, while *grotte-habitat* denotes a cave with settlement activities (see Balbín Behrmann and Alcolea González, 1999).

This distinction goes back to early works of Emile Cartailhac and especially Henri Breuil (Cartailhac and Breuil, 1906) who focused on *le religieux* as a fundamental anthropological category. Rodrigo de Balbín-Behrmann characterized the methodological access as follows: “Il ne réalisa pas une grande explication des raisons pour lesquelles on réalise une œuvre artistique, mais il existe en lui une prise en charge claire de la condition religieuse de celle-ci même, qui se différencie mal de ce qui serait un simple comportement magique. Si l'œuvre d'art a des raisons religieuses, le lieu où elle se représentait, devait être nécessairement un Sanctuaire, et le maître ou l'intermédiaire qui la créait, un prêtre ou un Sorcier” (Balbín Behrmann and Alcolea González, 1999: 24). Consequently caves with rock art are sanctuaries *per se*. For Breuil a painted cave is a “lieu éloigné de la vie quotidienne où l'on procédait à la découverte des mystères constitutifs de l'existence, dans la profondeur obscure et occulte, prohibée au non initié” (Balbín Behrmann and Alcolea González, 1999: 25). Balbín Behrmann underlines that caves „dans lequel on mange, dort, travaille, rit et dépose ses défécations, “ are excluded. According to Breuil images and profane activities belong to different spheres of human activities that have no overlap. But the concept of caves with rock art as sanctuary remains problematic because neither Breuil nor other scientists (see Arias (2009) for an extended discussion of ritual activities in caves with rock art) have defined it clearly: „Si les grottes ornées sont ou non des Sanctuaires religieux, il faut le démontrer, mais ce n'est pas un axiome, ni une réalité indiscutable” (Balbín Behrmann and Alcolea González, 1999: 55). Balbín-Behrmann emphasizes that not all caves with rock art fit into this picture, because in some caves with rock art remains of settlement activities have been discovered. He mentions Altamira, La Pasiega, Tito Bustillo and La Lluera. There have been also some ‘intermediate’ functional proposals, as for example those from Moure for Tito Bustillo cave,

distinguishing between ‘areas of habitat’ and ‘areas of decoration’ (Moure, 1989). The combination of images and settlement activities is therefore not an isolated single find; it appears repeatedly in Spanish caves with rock art. This is clearly the case at the Lower Gallery of La Garma (Ontañón-Peredo, 2003).

The conceptual separation of *grotte-sanctuaire* and *grotte-habitat* is however far from being of the past. Jean Clottes wrote with reference to caves like Niaux, La Vache, Les Eglises, Labastide, Les Trois-Frères and Enlène in the French Pyrenees: „grottes ornées pyrénéennes n'étaient ni des Sanctuaires au sens où nous l'entendons aujourd'hui ni des lieux de séjours habituels. Si les circonstances le permettaient, l'habitat était installé en un autre lieu, même si proche” (Clottes, 1996: 83). This statement refers to the presence of settlement activities in or near caves with rock art and conveys the impression that both activities usually took place in distinctive places. Only if external circumstances did not allow other solutions, both activities took place in the same spot (Clottes, 1996). Even the discovery of open air sites with settlement activities in combination with rock art, like in Foz Côa, could not overrule the concept of sanctuary and the conceptual separation of *grotte-sanctuaire* and *grotte-habitat*. Due to this conventionalism prehistoric research deprives itself of the possibility to capture the diversity of manifestations: “Nous ne comprenons pas comment on peut prétendre qu'une chose aussi variée que l'art rupestre paléolithique puisse se mettre dans l'unique catégorie de l'explication religieuse. Evidemment ce graphisme, beaucoup plus qu'un art, possède des ressorts suffisants pour représenter n'importe quelle chose. Elle semble un code riche, rempli de capacités expressives. Peut-être les auteurs d'une chose si complexe prétendaient manifester des pensées variées, des formules distinctes, non seulement religieuses, entre autre choses parce que pour eux il aurait été certainement difficile d'isoler le contenu simplement religieux des autres. [...] Est-il nécessaire de proposer une explication globale pour les graphismes paléolithiques? Pourquoi n'admettons-nous pas la variété possible des teneurs significatives et des raisons représentatives?” (Balbín Behrmann and Alcolea González, 1999: 27). Written nearly 20 years ago, these sentences are still of relevance. Prehistoric research still sticks in a dead-end into which the conceptual separation of *grotte-sanctuaire* and *grotte-habitat* have guided it: the concept of sanctuary is still in use without concrete definition and systematic analysis.

Basic research is needed to initiate a paradigmatic shift. In order to provide data for this process the present special issue compiles a part of the broad panoply of prehistoric remains and other contextual aspects from caves with rock art. For the guest editors only the systematic analysis of these findings permits testable statements

about the activities conducted in cave art in prehistory. This seems to be the only possibility to clarify which role activities may have played that could feasibly be identified as cultic. Only then will it be possible to analyse the relation between cult and space of prehistoric hunter-gatherers on the base of empirical data. But prehistoric research is not that much advanced.

Since the first discoveries of caves with rock art at the end of the 19th century the expressive drawings of animals and humans, but also abstract signs, have attracted archaeologists as well as the interested public (Bahn and Vertut, 1999; Clottes, 2008). These images represent more than all other prehistoric findings aspects of the thinking of past societies, without access to the original function for the actual viewer. „Bilder sind Zeichen. Wie sollte es uns angesichts der bekannten Bedeutungsvielfalt von Zeichen in verschiedenen Kulturen möglich sein, die in ihnen enthaltenen Informationen richtig zu lesen? [Pictures are signs. In view of the multitude of meanings of signs in any given culture, how should we be able to read the intrinsic information correctly?; translation Lenssen-Erz]“ (Zimmermann, 2013: 65). Zimmermann poses this question quite rightly. Whereas the reconstruction of prehistoric manual abilities and economic subsistence-strategies seems feasible for archaeologists, social-political structures are much more difficult to capture – if this is possible at all. „To infer to the religious institutions and spiritual life may seem superficially, perhaps, to be easier, and for the first few steps it may sometimes be so. [...] In general, I believe, unaided inference from material remains to spiritual life is the hardest inference of all.“ (Hawkes, 1954: 161f.). In this sentence Hawkes expresses not only the difficulty of the interpretation of rock art but there also covibrates the temptation of its easy reading.

Even if the hierarchization of archaeological work areas suggested by Hawkes in the 1950s looks outdated, it has not lost its topicality. Despite the long tradition, interpretation of prehistoric rock art is still extremely speculative and characterized by the personal intuition and the coincidences of acquired knowledge of the respective researcher. Clottes moulds this peculiarity in the interpretation of prehistoric rock art into a kind of rule: „La recherche ne se fait pas seulement au travers de lectures et références savantes. La sensibilité et les expériences personnelles interviennent et jouent un rôle, fût-ce de manière impressionniste, dans les idées et les hypothèses que nous concevons et développons“ (Clottes, 2011: 78).

To date, research into Palaeolithic art still focuses on meticulous recordings of figures and their modes of execution. Major enhancements in technology have even led to the atomization of the figures into their smallest graphical units (e.g., Pinçon and Geneste, 2010; Paillet, 2014). The integration of these graphical expressions into a wider frame of human behaviour in caves is still pending (Pastoors and Weniger, 2011; Pastoors, 2016b), although the significance of caves as spaces with frequent human activities and with cave art has been stressed by several researchers of the Palaeolithic (e.g., Bahn, 2003; Clottes, 1993; Lorblanchet, 1995) and it has had a first high time in the structuralist analyses of, e.g., André Leroi-Gourhan, (1965) – but the latter, again, largely isolated art and space from the remaining contextual features. The integration of the feasibly full context only seems possible under the premise of a clear distinction between viewing and reading layer, as claimed by Lenssen-Erz, (2001). On the viewing layer it is possible to capture elements of the zoologically known animal or human behaviour. These are reliable elements, because natural behaviour is in prehistoric context not subjected to cultural change. The researcher has a certain judgement about what is depicted. „Davon unberührt bleibt aber zu Anfang unsere 'Deutungs-Inkompetenz', die nicht durch wiederholte Betrachtungen der Bilder abgebaut werden kann, sondern nur durch Hinzunahme anderer Erkenntnisssysteme

(z.B. Archäologie, Ethnographie, Ethologie, Kognitionsforschung) [This does not initially touch upon our incompetence of interpretation which cannot be reduced through repeated regarding of the pictures but only through the inclusion of other epistemological fields (e.g. archaeology, ethnography, ethology); translation Lenssen-Erz] (Lenssen-Erz, 2001: 50). In the research into prehistoric caves with rock art it seems adequate to accept our reading-incompetence and to develop our viewing-competence instead. This is all the more important because religious concepts and rituals are hardly detectable in prehistoric archaeology – or only at the cost of speculations operating with preconceived concepts of religiousness such as sacrifice or a tiered world (Lewis-Williams, 2010). In such a view one may understand the burning of bones in the hearths of Enlène as a means to create a “religious ambience” (Lewis-Williams, 2010: 213) or the stone tool production in that cave may be interpreted thus: “ [...] the power of that realm [the supernatural] may have been 'activated' in some way by the sound of the knapping of the imported flint” (Lewis-Williams, 2010: 214). In view of such a purely hermeneutic approach there is the ambition to partly fill this gap of testable facts by the inclusion of contextual data from the spatial as well as archaeological evidence. The cave has to be included into the interpretation in an unbiased way, not attempting to contextualise everything within a certain paradigm such as shamanism (e.g., Lewis-Williams, 2002, 2010). It has to be included just the same way as settlement or other activities that have been executed with *the back to the images*, so to speak. This seems even much more important under the perspective that deep caves are no natural habitat for humans.

In the present special issue prehistoric images remain in the background. Instead the embedding context is being focused as the frame for the interpretation of caves with rock art, notwithstanding the fact that it seems difficult to determine what context means. „The term 'context' has many colloquial uses, but when it comes to archaeology it is a more or less firm concept, albeit a diffuse one.“ (Lenssen-Erz, 2012: 47). Ian Hodder's broad definition illustrates this problem: „The context of an archaeological 'object' (including a trait, a site, a culture) is all those associations which are relevant to its meaning. This totality is of course not fixed in any way since the meaning of an object depends on what it is being compared with, by whom, with what purpose and so on. There is thus a relationship between the totality and the question of relevance. The definition of the totality depends on perspective and interest and knowledge. In addition, there is a dynamic relationship between an object and its context. By placing an object in a context, the context is itself changed. There is thus a dialectical relationship between object and context, between text and context. The context both gives meaning to and gains meaning from an object“ (Hodder, 1992: 13). Against this backdrop Lenssen-Erz distinguished between dynamic and static context. Parts of the dynamic context are factors of the living environment, social relations, practices, beliefs and knowledge. These contextual aspects are hardly ascertainable in the archaeological evidence. The static context (Fig. 1) – geology, topography, spatial relations and artefacts – is however tangible, particularly since, static/durable context, [...], is of character that usually persists in its original configuration“ (Lenssen-Erz, 2012: 48).

If applied to prehistoric caves with rock art a long list of aspects creating the static context can be brought together (e.g., Bégouën and Clottes, 1981; Clottes, 1993). First of all there is the cave that shapes the frame with its path network and diverse spatial structures, and this forms a matrix on which prehistoric humans left their traces like fire, imprints in the plastic underground, constructions, concentration of archaeological findings, objects deposited in cracks and niches, traces of raw material outcrops and burials (Pastoors, 2016a).

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