



Art and the Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic transition in Europe: Comments on the archaeological arguments for an early Upper Paleolithic antiquity of the Grotte Chauvet art

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ABSTRACT

The spectacular art of the Grotte Chauvet stands out among all other examples of Aurignacian art, which are restricted to a handful of sites in other regions of western and Central Europe, which take the form of sophisticated carvings on organic materials and of simple engravings on rockshelter walls. Given its sophistication, Chauvet has understandably come to feature prominently in debates as to the nature of human symbolic origins, the behavioral capacities of *Homo sapiens*, the nature of the dispersal of modern humans across Europe, and the possibly contemporary extinction of *Homo neanderthalensis*. Significant objections to such an antiquity have, however, been made in recent years on the grounds of the style, themes, and technical practice of the art itself, and on the grounds of the AMS radiocarbon dating program that was first seen to suggest an early Upper Paleolithic age. To date, no attention has been paid to claims for an Aurignacian age on specifically archaeological grounds. Here, I undertake a critical examination of the archaeology of the cave and its wider region, as well as attempts to verify the antiquity of the art on the basis of comparison with well-dated Aurignacian art elsewhere. I conclude that none of the archaeological arguments withstand scrutiny and that many can be rejected as they are either incorrect or tautologous. By contrast, hypotheses that the art is of Gravettian–Magdalenian age have not been successfully eliminated. The age of the art of the Grotte Chauvet should be seen as a scientific problem, not an established fact. While it may prove impossible to prove an Aurignacian age for some of the Chauvet art I suggest a set of expectations that would, in combination, strengthen the robusticity of the ‘long chronology’ argument. The onus is upon Chauvet long chronologists to do this, and until they do, we must conclude that the art of the Grotte Chauvet is not dated, and very possibly much younger than claimed.

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Introduction

The spectacular art of the Grotte Chauvet—now amounting to over 420 images showing varied subject matter and considerably sophisticated techniques of production—has understandably attracted considerable excitement and attention since its discovery in 1994. Although initially thought to be of late Upper Paleolithic antiquity, AMS radiocarbon dates on charcoal from four of the cave’s images suggested that the charcoal—and thus art—was produced between ~30,000 and 32,000 BP. Consequently, the cave has become pivotal in discussions about the origins of Paleolithic art, and of the cognitive differences between Neandertals and early *Homo sapiens*, at least by the time the latter had arrived in Europe. Although it is possible (but as yet undemonstrated) that the cognitive changes assumed to be critical to the emergence of *Homo sapiens* occurred much earlier than Chauvet and on a separate

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continent, the cave, as with the Aurignacian archaeology of Europe, still occupies a prominent role in discussions of the ‘human revolution.’ For Mellars, ‘the Aurignacian period shows an apparently sudden flowering of *all the most distinctive features* of fully ‘modern’...cultural behavior. Such features include...remarkably varied and sophisticated forms of both abstract and sophisticated art—ranging from engraved outlines of animals, to representations of both male and female sexual organs, to the remarkable ivory statuettes of animal and human figures from southern Germany, and “*the elaborate cave paintings of the Chauvet Cave*” (2004: 461, my emphasis). Remove Chauvet from the equation and one is left with the simple outline paintings and engravings of France, Spain, and Italy and the (admittedly impressive) carvings in the round from southwest Germany, which, if it is fair to generalize about the Aurignacian from three restricted geographical regions of Europe, is still probably exaggerating to describe as ‘remarkably varied.’

Here, I examine some of the justifications for an early Upper Paleolithic antiquity for the Chauvet art, and contextualize these in

the wider debate. In a brief summary of Aurignacian art I shall ignore ‘personal ornamentation,’ a term usually used by Paleolithic archaeologists to define highly-organized and symbolically-organized items of exchange and personal display. While personal ornaments may, of course, be indicative of ‘symbolic’ activity, and of advanced planning in the landscape in the form of exchange networks and the biography of objects, they may also be indicative of little other than a desire to ornament the body. As Chauvet is not known to have yielded personal ornamentation, I shall restrict my discussion to figurative art.

The Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic transition: methodologies and generalizations

Typologies and dates, not fossils and biology, are the stock-in-trade of the European Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic transition debate. Artifact taxonomic units established in the first half of the twentieth century form the basic units of analysis, are taken as proxies for human populations, and hung very broadly in Pleistocene time by the imprecise dating methods currently available to us. Despite the often severe limitations in this endeavor, specialists have achieved considerable amounts in recent years, and something of a consensus has materialized over the last twenty or so. It is probably fair to assume that the following statements represent this consensus:

- Despite a poor chronological database and limitations to chronometric methods, Neandertals seem to have become extinct everywhere by ~30,000 BP;
- Despite virtually non-existent associations between Neandertal fossils and poorly-understood ‘transitional’ assemblages such as the Châtelperronian, Uluzzian, Lincombian, etc., it is most likely that Neandertals were responsible for the manufacture of most, if not all, of these assemblages;
- By the time Neandertals became extinct, given similar caveats, early modern humans appear to have established themselves over much of Europe;
- Given the caveats noted above for transitional assemblages, it is most likely that modern humans were responsible for the manufacture of most, if not all, Aurignacian assemblages;
- Thus, where ‘transitional’ and Aurignacian assemblages overlap chronometrically, despite large errors in precision which are usually ignored, it is likely that this represents a degree of contemporaneity between the two populations;
- This contemporaneity suggests that the two met and interacted, at least on occasion. Such interaction may account for the occasional presence of personal ornamentation in ‘transitional’ assemblages;
- The available evidence suggests that Neandertals did not engage in as much artistic activity as *Homo sapiens*. Despite the existence of utilized pigments on European and Levantine Mousterian sites (which are as abundant as those from African MSA sites), there are no convincing examples of Mousterian (or ‘transitional’) figurative art. Thus, it is unlikely that we will find examples of Neandertal art;
- By contrast, although figurative art is remarkably uncommon in the Aurignacian, the existence of some, in addition to examples of non-figurative art, apparent notation, and personal ornamentation all ‘add up’ to suggest that from the period of their initial expansion across Europe, *Homo sapiens* Aurignacians were fully artistic. This is in accord with their being ‘cognitively modern’;
- The discovery of the art of the Grotte Chauvet supports the latter notion spectacularly.

It should be evident that a number of assumptions are present in these axioms, although specialists are rarely happy about

questioning them. The result of building up consensus rather than seeking to eliminate testable hypotheses will inevitably create a potentially shaky mix of theory, assumption, and dogma, and in this context, it is easy to understand how certain assumptions are usually either rejected outright or accepted implicitly. The uncritical acceptance of the early age (or ‘long chronology’ as one might call it) of the Chauvet art by many specialists arose out of this situation, but this does not make it uncontroversially established that it is Aurignacian. The degree of axiomatic assumption may be seen by the fact that many specialists in the African/European MSA/MP and LSA/UP will presumably be happy enough with the following statement:

“Despite one or two critiques most specialists agree that convincing examples of Neandertal burials exist. Estimates of simple burials among the Neandertals vary between around 12 and 30 individuals spanning a period of approximately 40,000 years, (i.e., between ~75,000 and ~34,000 BP). The relative rarity of such burials probably indicates that burial was not a particularly common mortuary activity among Neandertals. Either Neandertals did not regularly practice mortuary activity, or the means by which they did so are not visible in the archaeological record. Certainly one should not generalize that ‘Neandertals buried their dead’: instead, it may be more apposite to say that some Neandertal societies, in some periods, buried some of their dead. The rest didn’t.”

Of course, the lack of any other form of visible mortuary ritual does not preclude any other forms such as exposure, but neither does it preclude the notion that most Neandertals did not engage in it. Thus, if burial is taken as one item on the ‘check list’ of modernity, one must conclude that some Neandertal groups were cognitively modern in at least this aspect of behavior, but many were apparently not.

The following statement follows a similar observational and logical process, although I suspect that many specialists would be less happy with it:

“Estimates of artistic or symbolic activity among MSA and earliest Upper Paleolithic *Homo sapiens* populations are generally in good agreement, emphasizing a handful of African sites with evidence of personal ornamentation (and engraved ochre ‘crayons’ from one site), and somewhat more evidence from Europe. The small number of sites excavated in such a large continent as Africa should make us very wary about making any generalizations at this stage, but the large amount of archaeological evidence from this period in Europe, and the rarity of evidence for art and symbolism before the mid-Upper Paleolithic probably indicate that art at least was not a particularly common activity among the earliest modern humans in Europe. Whether or not they practiced art on perishable materials is debatable, but one should not generalize that ‘Pleistocene *Homo sapiens* created art, painted caves, and sculpted figurines.’ It may be more apposite to say that some early modern human societies, in some phases, produced art. The rest didn’t.”

In this case one would have to conclude that if art is indicative of one aspect of ‘modern behavior,’ which given the ubiquity of the notion of ‘symbolism’ in the modernity debate, is highly likely, some modern humans (including Aurignacians) were modern in this light, whereas many were not. Again, one cannot distinguish between the notions that this indicates art was common but was practiced in ways that are now archaeologically invisible, or that absence of evidence really does provide evidence of absence. Problems of excavation and recovery, taphonomy, and survival aside, the two statements relate to the same set of assumptions and interpretations used by prehistorians interested in the

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