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A geode painted with ochre by the Neanderthal man

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ABSTRACT

The archaeological research carried out at Cioarei-Boroșteni Cave, Romania, exposed, in the H Mousterian layer (GrN 15054: 47.900 + 1800/–1500 BP), a spherical-ellipsoidal geode. Its structure was determined using a tomograph with special resolution. The particular morphology, aspect and features of the geode drew the attention of the Neanderthal man who introduced it into the cave due to its unusual look as compared to the other rocks. Using a fibre-optic digital microscope, it has been observed that the geode was painted with ochre. The Neanderthal man must have certainly attached an aesthetic importance to it, while its having been painted with ochre was an addition meant to confer symbolic value. Also, in Cioarei Cave, in addition to the ochre samples, the oldest ochre preparation containers made of stalagmites and stalagmite crusts were uncovered.

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R É S U M É

Au cours des recherches archéologiques menées dans la grotte Cioarei de Boroșteni, en Roumanie, on a découvert dans la couche Moustérien H (GrN 15054 : 47,900 + 1800/–1500 BP) une géode de forme sphérique-ellipsoïdale. Sa structure a été déterminée à l'aide d'un tomographe à résolution spéciale. La géode doit avoir attiré l'attention de l'homme de Neandertal par sa morphologie, son aspect et ses traits tout à fait spéciaux, ayant été introduite dans la grotte à cause de son aspect insolite par rapport aux autres roches. À l'aide du microscope digital à fibre optique, nous avons constaté que la géode avait été peinte à l'ocre. L'homme de Neandertal a considéré sans doute qu'elle avait une importance esthétique, et l'avoir peinte à l'ocre a été une manière supplémentaire de l'investir d'une valeur symbolique. Dans la grotte Cioarei, on a découvert aussi, à côté des échantillons d'ocre, les récipients les plus anciens utilisés pour la préparation de l'ocre, réalisés à partir de stalagmites et de croûtes stalagmitiques.

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1. Introduction

In order to understand the Neanderthal man's modern behaviour and cognitive abilities, researchers have appealed, throughout the time, to several types of findings, some of them interpreted as evidence of symbolism. The Neanderthal man introduced numerous materials into his settlements and conferred symbolic value on them, often called "curiosities" by researchers (Otte, 1996; Soressi and d'Errico, 2007). Of these, we shall refer only to three categories, the ochre, name used in the broad sense for several colorants, the fossils and the minerals-rocks, and, following the Cioarei Cave findings, we shall provide new evidence regarding the symbolic significance of these types of materials.

According to Leroi-Gourhan (1964a,b), the ochre, alongside the fossils, is the first evidence of the existence of objects with ritual value. The first mentions of ochre in Mousterian settlements, especially in the form of manganese dioxide, belong to Capitan and Peyrony (1912) in the shelter under the rock of La Ferrassie, Martin (1923) at La Quina, Bordes (1952) in Pech de l'Azé Cave and Sonnevill-Bordes (1969) in the shelter of Caminade-East. Emphasis is sometimes laid on scraping marks of samples resulting from their usage.

Both ochre and fossils introduced by the Neanderthal man into his settlements as unusual objects, were separately mentioned by several generations of archaeologists, but lately they have been increasingly interpreted as evidence of a symbolic thinking (d'Errico, 2003; d'Errico et al., 2003; Soressi and d'Errico, 2007; Zilhão et al., 2010). Some authors consider that if ochre had indeed a proved symbolic function in the African Middle Stone Age (MSA), it is but natural that this function should also be extended to the ochre found in the European Middle Palaeolithic (d'Errico, 2003; d'Errico et al., 2003; Zilhão et al., 2010). As a matter of fact, the oldest evidences of symbolism similar to those found in the European Upper Palaeolithic are known to have appeared much earlier in the MSA (d'Errico et al., 2003; d'Errico et al., 2005; Henshilwood and Marean, 2003; Henshilwood et al., 2001, 2002, 2004; McBrearty and Brooks, 2000).

On the other hand, many experts believe that the mere presence of ochre in Mousterian sites does not necessarily prove its symbolic nature. It might have had utility functions as well (Chase and Dibble, 1987), as several studies showed that ochre was used for tool hafting (Lombard, 2007; Wadley, 2005; Wadley et al., 2004).

Direct material evidence regarding the use of ochre for painting was provided by the discovery of ochre preparation containers in the Mousterian layers, dated more than 50,000 years, in Cioarei Cave from Boroșteni, Romania (Cârciumaru et al., 2002; Cârciumaru et al., 2012; Cârciumaru and Țuțuianu-Cârciumaru, 2009). They are direct material evidence of mixing the pigments in order to use it for painting various surfaces (Figs. 1 and 2). Also, analyses performed on the pigments found at Pech de l'Azé have showed that they were used to mark soft materials such as animal or human skin (d'Errico et al., 2009). Furthermore, Zilhão et al. (2010) publish perforated and pigment-stained marine shells found in two Mousterian layers in Spain.

Some were used as containers; others were included in the body ornamentation category by comparison to the discoveries made in Africa, which might represent evidence of symbolism of the Neanderthals.

In turn, fossils found in Mousterian contexts are being increasingly attributed to a symbolic behaviour of the Neanderthal man. Bednarik (2003) calls this class of artefacts "manuports suggestive of non-utilitarian functions" (p. 89). Archaeological excavations performed in Combe-Grenal Cave during 1953–1965 gave Bordes the chance to identify in layer 24, assigned to the Quina Mousterian, a fossil of the *Zeillerinae* species and in layer 61, typically Acheulean, a second fossil of the *Rhynchonellidae* species, both of *Terebratulina* genus specific to the Upper Cretaceous. They would pass into the scientific circulation much later when Demars (1992) publishes them alongside the ochre samples found in the Mousterian layers of Périgord.

Leroi-Gourhan (1964a,b) identified in the Mousterian layers of Arcy-sur-Cure, alongside the internal mould of a gastropod fossil and a spherical polypidom from the secondary age, an iron pyrite aggregate as well. Lhomme and Freneix (1993) also described in great detail a fossil of the *Glyptoactis* (*Baluchicardia*) species (characteristic of the Maastrichtian–Palaeocene geological period) recovered from the Charentian Mousterian of evolved aspect in Chez-Pourré-Chez-Comte Cave (Corrèze). The fossil could not have been found but in areas which implied the Neanderthal man's moving a few hundred kilometres away, therefore emphasizing its special importance to those particular human communities.

While studying the collection of materials from the lower level of Pech de l'Azé I cave, Soressi has recently recognized a brachiopod assigned to the *Terebratulides* family, which was carried to this settlement from about 30 km away (Soressi and d'Errico, 2007). In Tata settlement from Hungary, a nummulite (*Nummulites perforatus*) with a cross engraved was found next to a mammoth tooth, incised as well (Vértes, 1964). They seem to have been the first findings interpreted as symbolic evidence for the Neanderthal man. Such attestations are actually the closest to Romania.

Of the minerals and rocks introduced by the Neanderthal man into his settlements, alongside the pyrite aggregate of Arcy-sur-Cure Cave (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964 a, b), there are also mentions of a small galena block in a Châtelperronian level of Roche-au-Loup (France) (Demnard and Neraudeau, 2001) and probably a very small quartz crystal found in Abri des Pêcheurs (France) (Moncel, 2003).

As can be seen, among the strange objects introduced by the Neanderthal man into his settlements, ochre and fossils are the most frequent, while minerals and rocks, not used to obtain lithic tools but bearing a certain symbolic connotation, are rather rare.

2. The Cioarei Cave geode

Cioarei Cave from Boroșteni, Peștișani commune, Gorj County, is the most important Mousterian settlement in Romania as regards the complex interdisciplinary research conducted over more than 20 years (Cârciumaru, 2000; Cârciumaru et al., 2000, 2002). The cave was carved in a

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