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The role of the cave in the expression of prehistoric societies

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ABSTRACT

One of the major characteristics of prehistoric arts is that they belong to a very specific spatial context, be it open air, rocks, shelters or caves.

The presence of these images in these particular places is a mark of their identity and of the heritage left by these ancient societies and their beliefs, ever since the first cultural manifestations of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe. The specific choice of a wall or of a particular background, of a location in the cave can thus be just as significant as the image that one chooses to represent or the way in which they choose to represent it.

This is why the present research intends to study the links between the images and their supports, through a family which has already shown a particular affinity with the space: the family of signs.

The example of the signs highlights the fundamental role of the supports in the construction of images and the important and sometimes radical influence of the cave on their graphic identity. They illustrate thus “ways of expression” of the prehistoric men, expression of their developed and complex reasoning.

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1. Introduction

Prehistoric art are often known through representations, either paintings or engravings, reflecting the symbolic productions of prehistoric societies. Nevertheless, one of the major characteristics is that they belong to an original spatial context, be it open air, rocks, shelters or caves, which is a mark of their identity and of the heritage left by these ancient societies and their beliefs, ever since the first cultural manifestations of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe.

The graphical expression on the walls of the caves, the outcome of various techniques and of a firm gestural expertise, under shelter or in open air, is the most spectacular manifestation of new behaviours emerging at the dawn of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe. The artists have thus dedicated a location only visible to some, very often in the darkness, where their work would not be easy access or to see. For more than 20,000 years, 350 caves have been explored and painted in Western Europe.

This idea of a “painted cave” that is usually used when referring to Palaeolithic art is proof of the perspective that we have on this form of art, a view which implies for the artists a true pattern of approaching the subterranean areas. Specific analysis of signs help

to define this approach pattern and to identify through them the function that this caves and their walls hold in the very structure of this art. Methods of relief use, influence of support and structures choices, and organization in subterranean space are useful to assess the role of the cave in abstract prehistoric expression.

2. The cave: symbolical key painting area

An important symbol in many cultures and namely European ones (Plato's Allegory of the Cave being one example), the cave hides expression opportunities which have been largely exploited by humans. “It is obvious that a man who painted two points behind a stalagmite or on the edge of a cleft has done so as a result of a choice and of a decision” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1966: 47) and it goes the same for a theme (geometrical or figurative), the technique used or the style.

Although the technique, the style and thematic relations have often been analysed, the painted structure is but rarely studied. However, the specific choice of a wall or of a particular background, of a location in the cave can be just as significant as the image that one chooses to represent or the way in which they choose to represent it. The recurrence of the same graphic image in a cave, particularly in a given territory, is both a feature of the artists and of the style used for these representations.

In order to define the importance of the natural context in Palaeolithic art, it is extremely important to identify and

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characterise the support and structures chosen, as well as the manner in which they are used. Thus, it becomes obvious that the cave is actively present in the identity of each and every picture, through its implication in the form, technique, location or structure of this image.

André Leroi-Gourhan made a point of illustrating one of these very aspects, namely the location, through the study of the topographical distribution of the images. He dwelled upon the cave in its whole through the use of different spaces and structures: rooms, galleries, diverticula, where he identified the central parts as well as the extremities. He was able to identify a “model-pattern” by proposing especially for the signs, classifications based not only on form but also on their distribution and occurrence in the cave. He thus found three groups of signs: “the big signs located in the main compositions, the unfinished contours and lines in bunches assembled in intermediary zones, points and sticks gathering in the critical positions of the sanctuary: beginning, ending and some points of the main compositions” (Leroi-Gourhan, 1958a: 314). If numerous exceptions, appearing in the painted caves themselves, have fully shown to what extent all attempts at systematizing proves difficult if not impossible, considering the diversity of karst webs (Robert, 2012: 1944–1945), they do not invalidate the certainty of a spatial pattern of the images and most of all of the signs.

In order to understand as a whole the influence the cave has on its representations, it is important to analyse their direct supports on the walls. The latter were belatedly considered by the studies of the painted sites. It is through this new approach of study that the attention has evolved, and one of the main methods mentioned is undoubtedly the work of Léon Pales on the engraved plaques of la Marche (Vienna), about which he notes that, “the engravers have more often than not worked on rough surfaces rather than smooth ones, even if they had the freedom of choice” (Pales, 1969: 32).

Integration of support in research has been adopted since the 1970s in the caves, linked to a new line of archeologic work in painted caves, as in Pech Merle (Lorblanchet, 1981a,b). It is also seen in the methodology of samples under the form of a cartographic code, leading to a rigorous definition of the engraved elements on the lithic supports and of their morphotechnologic variations (Delluc and Delluc, 1984).

Nevertheless, the exhaustive registration has seldom led to a semantic analysis of the importance of the supports. Extensive work was dedicated to the use of natural reliefs (Lejeune, 1985), and some other work was dedicated to the distinction of different scales on the importance of the reliefs (Sauvet and Tosello, 1998). The cave thus appears as a joined architecture of different spaces, considered through the prism of different scales (Vialou, 2004).

Nowadays, the cave is most of all studied for its morphology, and the issues linked to the natural modifications or altering phenomena (Ferrier et al., 2014; Denys and Patou-Mathis, 2014). If the cave is consequently considered as more important in the studies on its representations (Villeneuve, 2008), its function is yet to be defined. This is why the present research intends to study the links between the images and their supports, through a family which has already shown a particular affinity with the space: the family of signs.

Self-evident expression of the abstract thinking of the artists during the Upper Palaeolithic, they alone represent the two thirds of the representations in parietal mode of the time. Most of work and studies dedicated to them have privileged the analysis and their classifications in terms of formal construction (Casado Lopez, 1977; Sauvet et al., 1977).

In addition to their constant recurrence and their typological diversity, they also present real parietal constructions, in which both the support and the cave are significant for their form and function in the cave (Fig. 1). The study by André Leroi-Gourhan



Fig. 1. Signs panel, dots, lines and claviforms on “Dièdre de Niaux” (photo E. D’Abbadie d’Arrast, E. Robert).

showed that their importance was significant for the painted ensembles, with identification of different groups according to their positions in the cave.

To highlight how signs are disposed on walls of the caves, an analysis of their graphic treatment, associating formal characters (aspect, dimension orientation...), contextual criteria (detailed nature of the rock supports) and association (link to other signs or animal figures) are used. The analysis has tried to emphasize the fundamental role of the supports in the construction of images and the important and sometimes radical influence of the cave on their graphic identity. This influence can be seen at several levels, as well on construction of images, as with their organization in the cave. For each, caves contribute to their cultural identity, illustrated by the way in which the natural reliefs are used.

3. Results

The first is integration, characterised by the insertion of natural reliefs (clefs, ravine paths, ridges, edge of walls...) on the direction of the image in order to compose it. This integration can become “pregnant” or “discrete” (Sauvet and Tosello, 1998) depending on the relief being most of the image or representing only a few isolated elements. The most spectacular illustration of the link support-image, the integration is often emphasised by figurative representations, but this seldom appears for the signs.

Only a handful of signs in the caves can thus present an integration of natural reliefs, proof of a graphic approach clearly different from the human and animal figurations. An example is an ovalised triangular of the Mayenne-Science cave whose base is “mainly made of rocky ridges” (Pigeaud, 2004: 62), or an angular sign of the Portel cave, made of a natural ridge on one of its sides and of a red path on the other.

On the other hand, the examples are much more numerous for the second way of using the reliefs: the frame. The use of lines of natural relief is intended for a partial or full limit-field of the image. This goes for groups of points, such as La Pasiega B, or for more elaborate motifs, such as Las Chimeneas for one of the quadrangular pediments of the main gallery (Fig. 2). In these cases, the frame defines the contour of the sign. In other cases, it becomes the apparent fulcrum, as seen for the spindle signs in the cave of Combarelles, which have a breach in the wall at their end.

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