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# The social dimension of human depiction in Magdalenian rock art (16,500 cal. BP–12,000 cal. BP): The case of the Roc-aux-Sorciers rock-shelter

Oscar Fuentes

UMR ArScAn 7041 – Ethnologie Préhistorique, 40, rue Maurice Utrillo, 86100 Chatellerault, France

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## ABSTRACT

The rock shelter of Le Roc-aux-Sorciers is one of the major Upper Palaeolithic sites of Europe, along with the caves of Chauvet and Lascaux. At the foot of the cliff of Le Roc-aux-Sorciers, from the 1930s onwards, the research carried out by Lucien Rousseau (1927–1933), S. de Saint-Mathurin (between 1947 and 1990), and then by G. Pinçon (since 1993) has led to a better understanding of this place that was occupied by hunter-gatherers 15,000 years ago. This is a rare example of an archaeological site that features a rich regular occupation (between 15,000 BP and 14,000 BP) attributed to the Middle Magdalenian associated with monumental parietal art. The sculpted frieze, an exceptional testimony to the artistic mastery of these peoples, contains – over a distance of almost 20 m – more than thirty animal and human depictions. The human figures, which are very prominent in this parietal art, make this place even more remarkable. The humans depicted on the shelter's wall and ceiling enable us to discuss these people's thought processes. The images pose the question of how these hunter-gatherers conceived the body, as well as the constructions of identity that may stem from that. In this article I propose to present a synthesis of the human depictions of Le Roc-aux-Sorciers and to analyse the role of these images in the occupation of the territory, and the inscription of the human groups in the landscape. It appears that, in the mechanisms of otherness of the ethnic groups of the Upper Palaeolithic, human depictions played an important role in the expression of identities.

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## 1. Introduction

Research conducted in recent years on the Roc-aux-Sorciers site has made possible, thanks to the contribution of an interdisciplinary scientific research team led by Pinçon (2009), a better understanding of the Magdalenian occupation, notably from recording of the rock art and analysis of material culture and the excavation archives of Lucien Rousseau and Suzanne de Saint-Mathurin.

The originality of the Roc-aux-Sorciers site lies in the monumental sculpted frieze that is still in place. Because it was found in its archaeological context, the Roc-aux-Sorciers is an exceptional parietal rock art site. This combination not only allows solid dating of the parietal art, going beyond a stylistic approach that is sometimes too random, but also enables us to address the behaviour of

Palaeolithic people through the remains of their daily lives as well as the artistic expressions associated with them.

The numerous depiction of human faces and bodies give an extra dimension to this site. These figures show images of self and of the other. Therefore, through the act of self representation, the Magdalenian artists expressed their concept of self, making it possible to discuss social identities.

It is through that choice of depicting the human body that I want to discuss the images in terms of understanding the social dynamics of individual groups. The Roc-aux-Sorciers is located in the eastern Vienne. Due to the importance of the sites attributed to the Magdalenian (Roc-aux-Sorciers, La Marche) and to geographical proximity (45 km radius), this territory makes it possible to address human interactions during the Magdalenian and their materialization in the sphere of productions.

I believe that we can then approach the importance of shared social norms, in the sense that they raise the question of the acceptance by everyone of the codes expressed at a given time. Representing one's own body, or that of another or of an imaginary

E-mail address: [fuentes.osc@gmail.com](mailto:fuentes.osc@gmail.com).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2016.06.023>

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being, is an act of statement in the light of the characteristics within Palaeolithic art. This exploration of the body reflects the will to make the self-image visible.

How, within the same Magdalenian territory characterized by shared technical norms, is it possible to address the strong identities which it comprised? I think that human depiction has a central place in the study of social identities. Ethnic groups are defined through various artistic, technical and linguistic expressions, posing the question of the importance of culture in the construction of identities (Eriksen, 1991). It is through the Roc-aux-Sorciers site that I want to address the issues of human depiction in the art of these hunter-gatherers.

## 2. Theoretical approach to human depiction in Palaeolithic rock-art

Human depiction is clearly omnipresent in Upper Palaeolithic rock art in Europe (in both parietal and mobiliary art). So it constitutes a major theme in Palaeolithic art. Certainly it is rarer than animal figures, both numerically and statistically, but such a comparison is deceptive, since it is based on formal differences that separate animal figures on the one hand, and humans on the other. These categorizations are influenced by arbitrary data selected according to the cultural codes of modern European research. These mechanisms of categorization are, in my view, one of the first limits to our understanding of Palaeolithic images (Layton, 1991). This leads us to a number of distorting prisms.

The first consequence is that the human form is considered to be a marginal motif, according to the statistical approach (Sauvet, 1988; Tosello and Fritz, 2005), thus reducing this iconography only in its numerical value. I think, therefore, that this underestimates the importance of such images in the social construction of human groups. As I have argued previously (Fuentes, 2013a, 2015a), the human form is regularly present in both parietal and mobiliary art, and displays a marked formal variability that is far greater than that employed in the depiction of animal forms. Images are not simply an imitation of Nature (Gombrich, 1960; Layton, 1991). They also express the aesthetic sense of the artist, stylistic choices, and are an agent of social identity and way of life. These three dimensions of the image enable us to understand the social issues of representation. The great formal variability of human depictions shows how much – far more than in animal figures – the image is sensitive to social relations, and to contact with the groups of « others » that can influence stylistic choices. Furthermore, human depiction is a direct reflection of how human Palaeolithic groups perceived their own image.

Moreover, this scientific approach is a legacy of the « naturalistic ontology » of the contemporary European context (Descola, 2013) in which the great figurative families are separated hermetically (humans and animals) from the viewpoint of the physicality of the images, whereas one must see the world's components as being in a *continuum* that links all beings (humans and non-humans). The thoughts that are expressed through what we call « art » display a tendency towards a permeability if shapes, mutations and interweaving between human and non-human beings. Palaeolithic images reveal this kind of ambiguity, materializing the complexity of this art and its continuities and discontinuities.

Human depictions are present in the most ancient layers of European Upper Palaeolithic sites. The female statuette from Hohle-Fels cave (in Germany's Swabian Jura) found in an Aurignacian level (40.000–35.000 BP), shows that within the range of artistic and cultural expressions, the image of self through depiction of the body already existed (Fig. 1) (Conard, 2009). This figure was made to be worn (instead of a head, there is a small perforation), in contrast to the animal statuettes in the same levels.



Fig. 1. Hohle Fels Venus, ivory, mammoth tusk (Swabian Alb, Germany), H. 6 cm. Photo Hilde Jensen, Copyright: Tuebingen University, Germany.

Thus throughout the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe, human depictions play a major role in self-expression, in the materialisations of the interweaving of man and animal (and hence his links with nature), and the concern of Upper Palaeolithic societies to express their motions and stories through images. This marks an important stage in *Homo sapiens'* ability to express complex symbolic systems associated with language and memory (Rossano, 2010).

### 2.1. Continuities and discontinuities in human depiction in Palaeolithic art

We have no detailed knowledge of the « ontologies » that governed Upper Palaeolithic societies throughout territory and time. The long timespan of the Upper Palaeolithic is the first barrier to the detailed understanding of the thoughts of hunter-gatherers and their insertion into their environment. But difficulties also come from the taphonomy of remains and sites, as well as the uncertain chronology of the occupations and seasonality of these populations. But this should not be an unsurmountable barrier to prehistoric archaeology and ethno-archaeology, since we can aspire to increasingly detailed observations and the development of collaborative research which makes cross-analysis possible.

This question of Palaeolithic ontologies is important because it leads us to discuss about the way of individuals and groups set different way to think himself and make their identity (of her self and the others). But ontologies is also the way that human beings

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